

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, MARCH 11, 2018,

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

An old snake goes to see his Doctor. “Doc, I need something for my eyes...can’t see well these days”. The Doc fixes him up with a pair of glasses and tells him to return in 2 weeks. The snake comes back in 2 weeks and tells the doctor he’s very depressed. Doc says, “What’s the problem...didn’t the glasses help you?” “The glasses are fine doc, I just discovered I’ve been living with a water hose the past two years!”

Today, the fourth Sunday in Lent is, oddly, about snakes. It’s not something we talk about a lot in biblical studies, but it is linked to perhaps the most famous verse of the New Testament, if not to the entire bible itself. The story goes back to the days of Moses to an incident in the *Book of Numbers*, and relates to the anger of God that I was speaking about last week. Beginning in *Numbers* 21, vs. 4, we learn that the Israelites were travelling from “Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.”ⁱ If you’re not aware of this story, as most folks will discover, it’s nearly impossible to understand the passage from *John* that is the focus of our bible learning for this week. In the *Gospel of John* we learn that “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”ⁱⁱ Hence the phrase which accompanies most ball games in nearly every stadium or sports arena finds its origins in this biblical moment.

I'm sure you've wondered, as have I, why this biblical citation appears on banners at these games, and the answer is that it is the intention of well-meaning, often born-again Christians to spread the good news of the gospel regarding eternal life. We are led to believe, through John's understanding of the role of the Christ, that by gazing upon him on the cross, whether we were there or have imagined it in our thoughts and dreams, or by looking at an image of it on our walls or hanging in our sanctuaries and chapels, that we, like the people in the wilderness, will be healed in our wildernesses of pain and sorrow at the sight of him crucified. We are told that there is such healing in every representation of Christ thereon that we have no excuse to not believe. And if we can trust in and partake of the healing that emanates from the sacrifice on the cross, how much more will we be able to believe in the gift of eternal life, where death is not to be feared but seen as it has been promised, a healing in its own right?

Because not even death can separate us from the love that we discover in believing and knowing a God who is love and unites all love into one form, one format, at life's end so that it is a new beginning, a new entity, a transformation that makes us and the world around us whole, healed, forgiven, and at peace. I am put in mind of the story of the father and son who were sitting in the kitchen enjoying an afternoon snack when a bee flew through the window. His son was highly allergic to bee stings and it just so happened that the bee headed straight for the boy's face. The father didn't hesitate for a moment and grabbed the bee just before it landed. The boy just felt his father's hand brush the tip of his nose. He jumped up in a severe state of panic, thinking he got stung. His father opened his hand and immediately the boy calmed down as he saw the bee's stinger stuck on his dad's index finger. "Look son, his stinger is gone; he can't hurt you any longer." This is what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote to the church at Corinth regarding dying: "So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' O Death, where is thy sting; O grave, where is thy victory?"

I read this and contemplated it, and it made me realize, once again, that as believers, we have hope beyond the grave. Death for us is not cessation of life, but merely a transference from this form of existence into the next – a higher, liberated form of life. Death, hell, and the grave have been conquered for us so that we can have confidence, even in this life, to rejoice in a future and a hope.

This is what John 3:16 can mean to the believer who is reminded of it merely upon seeing it flashed for a moment on the TV screen. That is what John 3:16 can mean to those searching for a way, an answer, a guide to truth in everyday living.

I could end my sermon here; indeed perhaps there are some present today that wish that I'd hurry up and get to the end! After all, what more can be said or pondered beyond where we have already gone this morning, i.e., to the end of life and beyond all in an attempt to understand just two verses from *The Gospel of John*? But John has more to say, much more, verses and chapters more, even in this *pericope*, this short section chosen to be read today. Beyond the words he chooses regarding condemnation, which are not particularly helpful to babes like us who are just beginning to study the bible together, still steeped in legal jargon, John brings his thought processes, what we call his Christology, his understanding of who the Christ is for us and for the world, and he proclaims a verdict, that what he means to say by all that has gone before is that he has noted and experienced that light has come into and rules the world. There are those who love darkness instead of light, and they work anxiously to exterminate the light, because it exposes their evil deeds. So therefore we need to live by truth so that we can come into the light so that we can exist in the sight of God.

Wow. I don't know what you think, but what we just heard is like having a doctoral thesis read aloud to us, with words we can understand and feelings we have experienced, yet with no idea of how or why it all comes together and whether we are moved or enlightened when it is all finished. I would like for some biblical commentator to assure us it was worth wading through the waters, and to say, at the finish, if you just remember "this", or if you'll just take "these words" to heart, you will have learned all that John, Jesus, and (by extension I suspect), God wants us to know.

Thank God for the preacher and writer David Lose. In his column/blog *In the Meantime* written for March 11, he shares that what Jesus articulates in John 3:16 is "what Luther called 'the Gospel in a nutshell' – that God is fundamentally a God of love, that love is the logic by which the kingdom of God runs, and that God's love trumps everything else, even justice, in the end."ⁱⁱⁱ

"Years ago," he tells us, "I preached a sermon about the offensive nature of God's grace, suggesting that we might add four words to the end of our service of

baptism, saying, 'Child of God, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...*like it or not.*' A few weeks later, a friend shared a bedtime encounter he'd had with his then six-year-old son. Upset that his father was putting him to bed earlier than he wanted to go, Benjamin said, 'Daddy, I hate you.' Benjamin's father, exercising the kind of parental wisdom I hope for, replied, 'Ben, I'm sorry you feel that way, but I love you.' Benjamin's response to such gracious words surprised his dad: 'Don't say that!' 'I'm sorry Benjamin, but it's true. I love you.' "Don't," his son protested, 'Don't say that again!' At which point Ben's father, remembering the words of the sermon, said, 'Benjamin, I love you...*like it or not!*'

Why was Benjamin protesting his father's love? Because he realized he could not control his father's love and twist it to his advantage. Indeed, in the face of such love there is no bargaining and, ultimately, no control whatsoever. If his dad had said that if he ate all his vegetables he could stay up, or agreed that Ben could stay up later this night if he went to bed earlier the next, then Benjamin would have been a player, he would have exercised some measure of control over the situation and, indeed, over his dad. But in the face of unconditional love we are powerless. Yes, perhaps we can choose to accept it or not, perhaps we can run away from it, but we cannot influence it, manipulate it, or control it. In the face of this kind of love, we are powerless. And only when we've died to all of our delusions of actually being in control do we realize that such loss of perceived freedom and power is actually life.

God's love, you see, is tenacious. And so God's love will continue to chase after us, seeking to hold onto us and redeem us all the days of our lives, whether we like it or not."^{iv}

The key to it all, therefore, is having ears that are willing to hear and hearts that are open. It comes down to what we embrace, what we stand for. You've perhaps heard the old salt about the minister who was preoccupied with thoughts of how he was going to ask the congregation to come up with more money than they were expecting for repairs to the church building. Therefore, he was annoyed to find that the regular organist was sick and a substitute had been brought in at the last minute. The substitute wanted to know what to play. "Here's a copy of the service," he said impatiently. "But, you'll have to think of something to play after I make the announcement about the finances. Use your

best judgment, or just play what you know...” During the service, the minister paused and said, “Brothers and Sisters, we are in great difficulty; the roof repairs cost twice as much as we expected and we need \$4,000 more. Any of you who can pledge \$100 or more, please stand up.” At that moment, the organist heard her cue, found inspiration, and went into the best rendition she could muster of “The Star Spangled Banner.”^v (You get it? Everyone found themselves standing for the anthem...)

Which brings us back to where we started, no? At the ballgame, with a banner of John 3:16 hanging for all to see as the camera scans the crowd during the playing of the National Anthem. Hopefully, this bible verse will mean more to you than it has before; prayerfully, it will open up to you the promise of eternal life; willfully, you might accept all God has to offer in the moment; and gradually, you may come to know Jesus in the light by which he best shines. For one thing Protestants will note is that he is no longer on the cross, nor is he in the tomb; the sun has cast its light upon both in the promise that he is risen to a new life, and by extension, if we believe, thank God, so shall we.

Amen.

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ⁱ NIV as found at <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Numbers+21%3A4%2D9&version=NIV>

ⁱⁱ [https://www.bing.com/search?q=john+3%3a14-](https://www.bing.com/search?q=john+3%3a14-21&form=EDGEAR&q=AS&cvid=6c3b4e93d24e48b29b5ff856f8e5c0d4&cc=US&setlang=en-US)

[21&form=EDGEAR&q=AS&cvid=6c3b4e93d24e48b29b5ff856f8e5c0d4&cc=US&setlang=en-US](https://www.bing.com/search?q=john+3%3a14-21&form=EDGEAR&q=AS&cvid=6c3b4e93d24e48b29b5ff856f8e5c0d4&cc=US&setlang=en-US)

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/lent-4-b/>

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v <http://www.jollynotes.com/christian-humor-christian-jokes-clean-jokes-best-christian-jokes/>