

Lent #4

3-14-2021

J.V. Trautwein, Pastor

Vicar Karen Pugatch

Celebrate (Introduction)

“The fourth of the Old Testament promises providing a baptismal lens this Lent is the promise God makes to Moses: those who look on the bronze serpent will live. In today’s gospel Jesus says he will be lifted up on the cross like the serpent, so that those who look to him in faith will live. When we receive the sign of the cross in baptism, that cross becomes the sign we can look to in faith for healing, for restored relationship to God, for hope when we are dying.”

We come together in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Opening Hymn: [“Lord Jesus Christ, Be Present Now”](#)

Psalm: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures for ever!

² Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
whom he has redeemed from trouble

³ and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

17 Some were sick^[a] through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities suffered affliction;

¹⁸ they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.

¹⁹ Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress;

²⁰ he sent forth his word, and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.

²¹ Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to the sons of men!

²² And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving,
and tell of his deeds in songs of joy!”

Hymn of Praise: [“The Glory of These Forty Days”](#)

Prayer of the Day

“O God, rich in mercy, by the humiliation of your Son you lifted up this fallen world and rescued us from the hopelessness of death. Lead us into your light, that all our deeds may

reflect your love, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.”

1st Reading: [Numbers 21:4-9](#)

2nd Reading: [Ephesians 2:1-10](#)

The Gospel: [John 3:14-21](#)

Hymn of the Day: [“Alas! Did My Savior Bleed”](#)

The Message: Vicar Karen Pugatch ([Video Link](#))

The Holy Gospel is according to John the 3rd Chapter
Glory to you O, Lord

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus^[a] by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”^[b] ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.^[c] ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You^[d] must be born from above.’^[e] ⁸ The wind^[f] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you^[g] do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^[h] ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son

of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[i]

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”^[i]

The Gospel of our Lord.

If you were to ask any random person on the street (that is if you were able to speak to any random person on the street) to name a bible verse. Chances are that many would fire back at you John 3:16. Some might even be able to quote the verse — it is easy to memorize — not as easy as “Jesus wept” but still quite doable. Herein lies the danger -today's gospel reading is fraught with danger- like a well-known path we think we can walk safely in the dark, this well-known verse has caused many to stumble. Within these 21 verses in John are several of the most misunderstood, misused, and weaponized verses in the Bible. Quoted to maintain an exclusionary belief system rather than to share the good news that God loves creation-all creation. That again, and again this love is a gift freely given for all.

Many people are capable of naming John 3:16 yet are unaware of the context of this most famous of verses. That it comes within a nighttime conversation with a powerful Pharisee named Nicodemus- Nicodemus means conqueror of the people. We do not know much about him, but we surmise he was wealthy and powerful, and perhaps spiritually hungry. We know he comes at night-maybe out of fear or an abundance of caution—following Jesus got you kicked out of the synagogue -he had a lot to lose-better to go at night when you can't be seen clearly; maybe because he knows he will have uninterrupted time with Jesus whom he names as a rabbi who comes from God (not recognizing God incarnate before him) - there is something about this Jesus that Nicodemus wants to get to the bottom of-he is intrigued. In John's gospel, darkness and light are used as metaphors about relationship with and recognition of Jesus. The story that follows this morning's text is the story of the “Samaritan woman at the well” a story told in the bright light of the day-a story in which the woman recognizes Jesus as the savior.

The conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus happens at night and begins with how to see the kingdom, how to be in relationship with God-being "born again"-more correctly born anew from above- something that Nicodemus can't seem to get his head around. This well- educated, religious man is baffled, his training tells him that following the law is the way, his common sense tells him that adults can't enter the womb. But what Jesus is speaking about, in language we recognize as baptismal, is God's giving of the Spirit. This creates a new identity-that of children of God- this identity connects us through relationship to the loving, creative activity of God in the world. In John's gospel this relationship with God is what the kingdom is all about. Following the way of Jesus is from above- God's gift of love for all. Maybe Nicodemus doesn't get it because he sees it is about grace and grace is difficult for those in power to embrace-after all it is given freely to all-not just the powerful law followers but to the weak, to sinners and outsiders alike.

When Nicodemus fails to understand, Jesus calls to mind a story he is likely to know. It comes from Numbers- when their grumbling and turning away from God made God so angry that poisonous snakes came among the Israelites. In answer to their prayers for help and promises of repentance, God does not remove the evil snakes, rather Moses is instructed to lift a bronze snake on a pole. It is only in looking upon that snake-the result of their own selfish actions and recognizing they are helpless without the saving love of God that the people are healed. So too Jesus, the unique Son must be lifted up - (I use the word unique because that is what the Greek word "monogenes" means- Jesus has a unique relationship as son of God-ours is a relationship better described as adoption) Jesus is lifted up not just on the cross, but in the resurrection and ascension- the word also means exalted. God so loved the world that God gave- not judgement, but salvation through the unimaginable love demonstrated by Jesus. FYI the word judgement (translated as condemn in the NRSV) in Greek comes from the same root word that we get our word crisis. In short, it is our sinful or evil actions-those things that draw us from the way of God- our love of the darkness that convicts us and creates the many crises in our lives. These things that separate us from God can only be addressed and healed by the never-ending gift of God's love that we receive again and again.

Why then do we hear this story? Why are we too directed to gaze upon that serpent on the pole and to see Jesus crucified? The Israelites were forced to look up-not to idolize the serpent on the pole or us the cross but to see and realize that we are totally dependent on God to bring life out of death. We look upon the cross because we all too often choose death-dealing practices over life giving ones, in John's vernacular darkness over light- The cross exposes how corporate, systemic evil is death dealing.

The poisonous snakes did not go away, the evil all around us and our complicity in it will not go away, neither will God's love for all creation. We look to the cross and see what happens when humankind is left to our own devices, when we choose our own power and self-interest over the way of Jesus, when we create our own crises. Those with power tried to destroy God's kingdom on earth, tried to kill the way of love that threatened them and the oppressive

systems that benefited them, but God so loved the world that their way was thwarted by that very love. Love may have come down at Christmas, but love rises triumphant in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

God's love is for the world-all of it. God gives redemptive love again, and again inviting us into relationship, into finding common ground, into the liminal spaces and places where our lives intersect. Even when those places are places of uncertainty, grief, suffering and death God is there loving first and loving always. Again, and again God loves first calling us to engage in works of sacrificial love, indeed showing us what that love looks like.

It has been a year when many have wondered, where is that love of God you are talking about? But in this Covid year love abounds because even in the midst of all the pain, suffering, inconvenience and death God is with us loving first, loving always in the sacrificial love of neighbor shown to us in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Make no mistake about it, this way of love is not easy because it goes against so much of what the world tells us to do. God's way of love pushes back against systems of oppression, against human nature. God shows a way of Love, demands a way of love-love your neighbor-you don't have to agree with your neighbor-but you need to love them.

What does love look like in this Covid fever dream of a year? It looks like wearing a mask, washing your hands, and keeping six feet apart, it looks like grocery clerks, garbage men, delivery drivers, nurses and custodians and doctors, it looks like listening to the experts, following the science. This love looks like senior deliveries, Christmas in a bag, and zoom-so much zoom. This love looks like Thanksgiving dinner for two. This love looks like Vicars and pastors who wish they could give you all a hug. It looks like saying good-bye from a distance-'til tomorrow, next week and sometimes until we meet again in God's great promised kingdom of light.

Nicodemus left Jesus that night just as he had arrived-in the dark. We really do not know how that encounter may have changed him. We meet him again in John's gospel-warning those with power to be diligent in following the letter of the law in their dealings with Jesus and again when he helps to prepare Jesus' body for burial- was this just a fulfillment of the law- getting it done before the sun went down or did he finally get it-was it the act of a disciple? Was he there at the foot of the cross as Jesus died-maybe crying like a newborn? Amen.

Anthem: ["God So Loved The World" St. Pauls' Cathedral Choir](#)

Offering*: ([On-Line Giving Link](#))

We give thee but thine own, what e'er the gift may be; all that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee.

The Prayer: Our loving Father, You have shown us the way of love through your son. We have been experiencing the need to live this love through these troubling times of the pandemic. Continue to lead us with your love so that we may be empowered to love each other in how we act during the remaining months of this crisis. But even more important may we be so committed that even after this crisis we will actively live our love for life and others. The world and nation needs us to be faithful in living the life of love.

As the pandemic continues we still need to follow the life-saving guidelines even though the light at the end of the tunnel is getting brighter and brighter. When available to us, let us each seriously consider receiving the vaccine. Continue to give the medical community the wisdom and strength to care for those who have been overcome by this life threatening virus. We remember all those who have lost their lives to Covid-19 and continue to ask for your comforting presence with their loved ones.

We pray for all who need your comforting and healing presence especially Bob and Pat Allen, Heidi Brackbill, Parker Brennan, the Cronin family, the Elshafei family, Betty Fultz, the Johnson Family, Robert Karner, Donna Mayhew, Wendy Neumann, Elise Oliver, Peter Olsen, David Otto, Dottie Reitz, Robert Reitz, Linda Rigby, Colin Shea, Jerry Shea, Jack Smith, the Spiegler family, Linda Stephens, Della Mae Strobel, Yongyin Sun, Esther and Buck Trautwein, Linda Williamson, Wyatt Lee Wolf, Vicki and Christian Zanartu, Pastor Jack, We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen

The Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make His face shine upon you;
The Lord lift up His presence upon you and give you peace. Amen

And now my brothers and sisters
Live on knowing God's love,
The joy of living this life of love,
And the peace which only comes through the power of His presence within you.
So live on in Love, Joy, Peace, and Power.

Closing Hymn: ["The King of Love My Shepherd Is"](#)

We are discontinuing in person worship services on Sundays until further notice. The online worship experiences will continue as well as the Midweek Thought.

*Offering to be sent to:
Bob Brackbill
10274 Raleigh Tavern Road
Ellicott City, MD 21042

Epiphany Lutheran Church
9122 Sybert Drive
Columbia Hills
Ellicott City, MD 21043
<https://www.epiphanylutherancolumbia.org>

Please note that you now have the opportunity of online giving with the link found after the offering designation or here: https://tithe.ly/give_new/www/#/tithely/give-one-time/2627291