



The Movement Gathers Momentum

John 3:14-21

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In the midst of this season of Lent, we are reflecting on the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*. Dr. King's recollection of the Montgomery Bus Boycott offers a very Lent-worthy focus on moving in the direction of freedom.

You know, moving in the direction of freedom is the very intention of the season of Lent. We are, by naming the brokenness in our lives and our community, moving toward the receipt of God's freeing grace, which is celebrated each Sunday, culminating in festiveness at Easter. It is the acknowledgement of the brokenness and the need of a savior that allows for the necessary and liberating healing of God's love.

Today's scripture offers us a story of such acknowledgement and guidance.

This Biblical story is usually overshadowed by the presence of one of the most well-known and often misunderstood texts in the whole of the Biblical Word. It's a hard passage to overlook. I mean, folks like Tim Tebow wear it on their eye-black during football games. It gets its fair share of notoriety. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son ..." ... you know the text. And, you've probably heard it used to condemn and judge any who do not believe in Christ, for the logical conclusion of this text is: *If you have to believe in Christ to not perish, then any who do not believe in him must perish*. Right?

Often, to rebut the gross misrepresentation of this text, many a Christian will follow up by asking if you know John 3:17. Have you read the whole story? ... This following verse is not even held as an afterthought, it's (quite frankly) an unknown thought. "Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it."

There is, here again, a logical argument that can be made: John 3:16 can't be declaring one condemned to perish simply for lacking faith in Christ, because immediately after this text, we're told Jesus didn't come to condemn us. He came to save us.

What I find fascinating in these arguments is that the majority of those who quote both John 3:16, and those who rebut with John 3:17, lack any deep understanding of the context in which these two verses are found. And, you know my soapbox, context matters. These verses don't sit on an island, they are part of a broader story. So let's consider the broader story, and perhaps find a greater call to faithfulness than the debate over John 3:16 and 17 usually has to offer.

If we back up to the start of chapter 3 here in John's gospel, the first thing we find is that this text is not set in a communal space. Jesus isn't out on the hillside preaching another sermon on the mount. The text begins in verse 1, "There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus – a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night." ... Did you catch that? This is the context for John 3:16, so don't act like you know the story if you didn't catch verse 1. Listen to John.

This is not a public story. This is not an example of Jesus chastising or critiquing the leaders of the temple in front of their constituents, which he is known to do. This is not Jesus using his bully pulpit to convince everyone to have faith in himself. It's nothing like the story of Jesus flipping the tables and causing a great commotion in the temple commons, which we looked at just last Sunday. No ... no. Nicodemus, a leader in the temple, has come to Jesus by night with some faithful curiosity. Have you ever gone to Jesus at night with faithful curiosity?

You have to understand what Nicodemus is doing to grasp what Jesus is going to teach him.

See, Nicodemus was worried about how asking such questions could affect his job. Nicodemus knew that, should he ask these questions publicly – in front of others – with such earnest desire – that he might find himself applying for unemployment. The temple leaders didn't have much earnest desire to give Jesus any credence, especially in the public realm, so one of their own naming that he is a known "teacher sent from God" ... well, that would be bad for business. See, Nicodemus was concerned for his well-being – which is why he went to Jesus in the first place ... but he was also concerned for his well-being – which is why he went at night.

His faithful curiosity is on display in his questioning of Jesus, "How can one be reborn? How can these things you teach be true?" He's not denying Jesus' authority, or telling Jesus he's wrong. He has a piqued interest in Jesus' teachings, wanting to know, "how can I be faithful, because right now, I just don't understand."

Beginning in verse 11, Jesus goes deep in his teaching with Nicodemus. And as Jesus' teachings usually go, what he has to say will not easily be understood.

Firstly, Jesus names that no one – not one human being – not you, nor I – has gone into heaven, except for the one who has descended from heaven. I really appreciate this about Jesus. This kind of opening line is Jesus' way of saying, "Bless your heart." Jesus is real sly when it comes to making sure we understand that we don't know jack. Only one has been to heaven, and therefore, only the one understands the things of heaven. ... But you and I are not that one. That is Jesus alone.

Then Jesus offers this cryptic, symbolic, and mind-blowing statement about who he is as the sent Son of God. Verse 14-15 reads, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

This text flows so easily in to verse 16 that we just want to keep reading – the language has already connected in our minds, "whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Verse 16 is on the tip of the tongue. But we have to stop, cause if we don't, we miss the very intention of John 3:16. It doesn't

stand alone, it stands in the midst of an intentional statement to a leader in the temple who has come to Jesus at night to learn about faithfulness.

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Nicodemus is a leader of the Jews. You can't reference a story from the Hebrew Scriptures to a leader of the Jews and expect them miss the connection. ... That's like making a Joe Gibbs reference and thinking Washington sports fans wouldn't immediately be transported back to the days when they had a decent football team in town. ... If the connection matters to the person Jesus is speaking to, don't you think the connection should matter to us if we want to understand what Jesus is saying?

When did Moses lift up the serpent? What's the story there? ... I'm glad you asked.

In Numbers 21 we find a story about the Israelites wandering in the wilderness in their journey from slavery in Egypt to the glory of the promised land. As we find a number of times in the story of the Exodus, the Israelites had become hungry and thirsty, and began to complain against God and Moses for leading them out into the wilderness to suffer such inhospitable conditions. Right? Cause you know, suffering hunger and thirst in the wilderness seemed unfavorable at the time compared to the suffering of oppression in Egypt, where at least they had food and water.

As is recorded in the story, God did not look favorably upon their complaints. The text offers, “The Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.” And, I have to reference the Hebrew here, because it just adds insult to injury. The word used to describe these serpents comes from the Hebrew word *seraphim*. Do you recognize that word, *seraphim*? *Seraphim* is the Hebrew word for angels – God's heavenly army. So the text is telling us that God sent venomous snake angels to bite the people for their bitterness and grumbling.

In case it's unclear, you can't ignore venomous snake angels, so for sure, the Israelites got the message. The text says they went to Moses and asked for forgiveness, saying they were sorry they had sinned against God and Moses, and begged for the snake angels to be taken away. So, Moses interceded on their behalf, and asked the Lord to take away the serpents. And here's what God did – the text says, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.” ... This is why our health industry uses the serpent on the pole as a symbol of health.

Now, did you catch what God did? Did you see how God dealt with the Israelites' problem?

The Lord had Moses set a serpent upon a pole so that when the people had been bitten, they had a way to be saved. ... I think you missed it again. ... The Lord had Moses put a bronze serpent statue up on a pole, so that the people could look at it to be saved *after they had been bitten*. ... Ok, I'm just going to ask the question: why did God not just take the serpents away?! Why provide a way for

people to be saved from poisonous snake bites, when it's clearly in your capacity to just get rid of the snakes that are biting the people in the first place?

And you think that's problematic? In his conversation with Nicodemus back in John, Jesus says that he, the Son of Man, is going to be like the serpent who is up on the pole.

Now walk with me here, because this is some deep thinking going on. Nicodemus – a wise, wise man – a leader in the temple – has to real time comprehend what Jesus is trying to say.

“In Numbers 21 God used a symbol of the very problem to be solved as *the solution* to the problem - snakebite victims had to stare at the image of a snake.”ⁱ

So think about this, what is Jesus a symbol of? What problem is Jesus an example of when he is lifted up on the cross, that he can serve in a capacity like the bronze snake? ... Jesus ain't no vampire. Jesus-bit victims aren't looking up to Jesus on the cross for healing. So what is the comparison between Jesus and the bronze serpent?

See this, my friends, this is where we get to read John 3:16. Once we understand the context of the conversation that's happening, the text makes all the more sense.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him ... that is, who looks to him high and lifted up, may not perish but may have eternal (or everlasting) life.”

The Greek is vitally important here. Marianne Meye Thompsons offers, “‘Eternal’ or ‘everlasting’ life is not simply unending: it is qualitatively different from mortal life in the present world, because it participates in the blessings of the coming age, including being with God, who is living and eternal. Because it is lived in union with God, such life is characterized by fullness or abundance.”ⁱⁱ See, Jesus, up on the cross, is the divine witness of death, which leads to life. I'll say that again, Jesus, up on the cross, is the divine witness of death, which leads to life. All who are dead, who are walking dead, who have given themselves to the wages of sin which leads to death, can look at Jesus on the cross to find new life.

The Biblical story is so full of this reminder that because of the sin of the one man – because of the first sin in the garden, we have all inherited this sinful way of life, which leads to death. But, Jesus crucified, the witness of the one man on the cross, is a witness that God has found a way to move us past the brokenness of sin and to a more faithful way of living that doesn't just offer its benefits when we die, but promises that, should we see the way of God in Jesus Christ, we can receive the benefits of such full life even here and now.

And listen, this is why context matters. Jesus isn't speaking to known heathens in this text. Jesus isn't trying to convince atheists or agnostics that there is a more faithful way of living. No .. no ... Jesus is talking to a leader in the church. Jesus is speaking to one who, because of his position in the church, would have been thought to have his faithfulness all figured out. John 3:16 isn't offered to try and correct all of the unbelievers out there in the world. Jesus is saying to those who believed they were

already living in faithfulness – like the Israelites in the wilderness who knew they were God’s people – that they had strayed from understanding God’s will and God’s way. And that in their brokenness, in their sinfulness, in their perversion of power using God’s name for their own benefit, that if they just looked to Jesus on the cross they might find new life – abundant life – full life.

I know we’re going longer than usual this morning, but Jesus’ hasn’t stopped talking. He’s got more to say.

Jesus continues, “The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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.”

At first, this may seem to be just another one of Jesus’ cryptic stories about light and darkness. But in this moment, let us not forget, in this moment, one must remember, that Nicodemus has come to Jesus in the darkness of night. We have to remember, Nicodemus didn’t want others to see what he was doing. He was too concerned with his own well-being and his job security to come to Jesus in the middle of the day when the light would have exposed his actions. And Jesus says, “All who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”

Yes, Jesus is speaking to the church universal – yes, we have something we can learn from this story – but first and foremost, Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus.

And this, come on now, this is where the story gets really good. Nicodemus is only mentioned twice in the entirety of the Gospel text. His name, his character, his person is only seen two times. Once, he comes to Jesus in the dark of the night in faithful curiosity, and Jesus chastises his unwillingness to put his faithful curiosity on display. He is given a hard time by Jesus for coming at night.

Do you know the second time Nicodemus shows up? When does this temple leader appear in the story again?

I want to read from John 19:38-42. “After these things (meaning, after Jesus was crucified), Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.”

Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus at night in fear of what might become of him in the temple realm should he show an interest in the teachings of Jesus, is one of the first to come to Jesus after his crucifixion, bringing with him 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes to prepare Jesus’ body for burial. Do you not think there has been a change in Nicodemus’ life? We know that Jesus was dead by about noon

time on that day, and there, in the midst of the light of the day, Nicodemus is there to care for the body of the Lord – not with a few scraps of cloth, but with a wealth of burial spices.

See friends, Nicodemus had seen Jesus high and lifted up. Like the bronze serpent on the pole, Nicodemus had looked up to Jesus on the cross and found a new life that would no longer allow him to hide in the shadows of the darkness, but that led him to come out in the middle of the day, in the place where everyone might see him, with not a small display, but an extravagant display of gracious hospitality and love for the one who had given him new life. For the one who gave him meaning in life. For the one whose death signaled a new power and new chance at life.

This is the invitation of John 3:16 – not that we might chastise those around us for lacking faith, but to invite us to understand the powers of sin and death that hold us back ... that constrains the faithful to keep from speaking up against the powers of death and oppression in our midst. And praise God for Nicodemus, for he is our witness – may his story testify – that when we look to Jesus on the cross, when we see the death of the Son of God lifted up for all to notice – we can receive new life that leads us from the shadows of self-concern and preservation to the light of justice and glory that promises new life for all who believe – for all who see Christ as Lord – for all who receive the promise of God's glory.

Let us look to the Lord, that you and I might follow in Nicodemus' footsteps and receive the promise of new life today. That we might live together in the glory of God's promise as children of the crucified One. For the glory of God. Amen.

ⁱ Scott Hoezee. Cep.calvinseminary.edu. Retrieved March 9, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Marianne Meye Thompson. *John: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.