

John 3:14-21

John 3:16 is the most well known verse in the Bible, for good reason. Beautiful in its clarity and message, comforting in its proclamation of salvation by grace through faith, and comforting doubly and again for the heart of a loving God shown in it.

We will fight the temptation to try and offer some new spin on this verse, some unmined nugget, and rather, instead of trying to find something new, let it come to us anew. Once more. And see its beautiful message of God's love shown in Jesus' crucifixion.

To that end, Let us tend to some peripheral matters of the text and let us see how they support this beautiful message.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, because he is ashamed, but somehow cannot stay away. It is almost as if, as Jesus tells us in John 6 that no one comes to Jesus unless they are drawn to him...

And so Nicodemus, like a moth to flame is drawn to Jesus at night. He receives beautiful promises, but also some quite challenging teaching.

Jesus talks of how one must be born again by water and Spirit, we, of course point to the baptismal font here. And then Jesus even goes Old Testament on us, where just as Moses lifted up the serpent, so the Son of man must be lifted up.

You heard that weird story from Numbers today about the snakes and a pole. Why did God need a pole to heal? Couldn't he have just healed those who he knew would look at it? And not heal those who he knew in their hearts would refuse the means of healing? He could have, yes. But don't you see? In the act of raising up the serpent and telling the people to look upon it, by the fact of doing that well, those who refused to look and refused to be healed are therefore condemned not just by God, but by their *own refusal* to receive his healing promise.

The pole was not sent to judge, but to heal. The serpents were sent to judge. The Pole was sent to save. Those who didn't want the healing, weren't healed. And now Jesus says "so must the Son of Man be lifted up," not to judge but to bring eternal healing. Death is the judgment, it's the wages of sin. The Son lifted up on the cross is sent to save. And all who look upon him in faith, all who believe in him, receive it. And all who are too smart for that - to believe in the nonsense and fairy tells of a dead man saving me... well, they don't look. And who's head is that upon? Their own.

And now this sermon is one of judgment and condemnation and depressing realities of rejection. And in a way that must be so, Jesus himself after the beautiful verse 16 and 17 speaks of those who are condemned already – those in a dying world, dying because of their sin, the poison of the evil serpent that infects us, and now they have rejected the means of healing! They have rejected the serpent on the

pole, they have rejected the Son of Man lifted up to die, and so their poison remains, their sin remains and so they stand even now as dead men walking.

And again, Jesus speaks of the light and darkness, the light is there, the light is here! And our evil deeds, we bitten by the serpent, we, serpents ourselves, we can slither and hide from the light that burns and purges away our sin. It might feel safer, it might be easier in a way to hide in the dark, but to do that is to hold onto the darkness and evil and poison that will kill us.

Rather, let us come to the light and confess the wickedness, poison, serpentine horror that is us – and be purged of it, be washed of it. And to be healed until all that remains are the good works that God has accomplished in you to bring comfort, care, and healing to this world he so dearly loves.

And so there stands Nicodemus in the dark. He has been called, drawn, to Jesus, will he step into the light, by God's grace and further calling, and see the Son of Man lifted up to win for him eternal life?

In Chapter 7, Nicodemus shows up again. As the leaders seek to arrest Jesus, we read: "Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, 51 "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" And later in chapter 19 we read, after Jesus' death: "After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear

of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. 39 Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus[e] by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds[f] in weight. 40 So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.” And so Nicodemus is drawn at night, is offered challenging teaching, and beautiful promises. And there he is, following after Jesus into death – into life?

And here we sit. We have been called, drawn, and come through the new birth of water and the Spirit. We stand and confess the vile poison in us, our inability to keep God’s law and not only that but our desire not to!

Surely these themes of judgment must come our way then! And yes, the poison of sin and it’s effects certainly has come our way.

But has not also the medicine? The Pole? The Son of Man lifted up?

So why do you worry? If the medicine was in transit, or on a shortage, or, dare we say, ineffective, then yes you should worry. But is Jesus not here? Has he not called you, claimed you? Is he too busy for you? Too distracted? Or is his arm too weak to save? In the night of shame or fear or doubt will he not hear you as he heard Nicodemus? Or is he risen? And has he come already and come for the world – which includes you? Then rejoice. Rejoice in this love of God.

If he wanted to leave us to die, he could, very easily. If he wanted to wipe us out, he could, very easily. If he wanted the medicine of the gospel to go to someone other than you, he could have arranged that quite simply. But it has come to you, to the world!

How does that play out with the masses still hiding under rocks? With the wandering in the darkness? With that person you care about who is apathetic? With that child that's wandered? With the ten year old in Asia who barely knows who the Son of Man, Jesus is?

And now our hearts tremble with fear and injustice that perhaps God *doesn't* so love the world, or that he is incapable of reaching out to the children, or around the world. But folks, that's the opposite of what these beautiful passages teach us. God does love the World. So much so that he gave his only Son. Which of you are giving your children into death for the child on the other side of the globe or down the street? None of you are. And of course you don't have to. The Father has. And not as divine child abuse no, the Son too, willingly is lifted up to suffer for the world, for the lost, for those like us who were enemies.

God is at work to call, to bring light. We have seen his heart and his desire to save. Otherwise he wouldn't have come. Look to the Cross, see the Son of Man lifted up, and there see that our God is just and he is loving and he is good.

Come to him in your anger at the ways of the world, come to him in your grief, come to him in your darkness, come to him in your poison, come to him in your fear. And find in him a Savior who knows pain, anger, fear, and grief, he knows of death. And find in him, risen and strong to save, a loving God who has come for you. Amen.