

Lent 4 B 2018

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

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[John 3:14-21](#); [Numbers 21:4-9](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Our gospel reading just now contains a famous verse, maybe one of the most famous verses in the Bible. Verse sixteen. But the reason that this gospel reading is assigned this morning is not verse sixteen. It's verse fourteen. "*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.*"

That's the key verse today. If you were paying really close attention, then you heard the first reading from the fourth book of the Old Testament, Numbers. An enchanting story about serpents. About the healing power that is somehow mysteriously connected in our minds with their poison. In ancient Greek mythology, the god Asclepius carries this exact same thing, a rod with a serpent entwined around it. Asclepius is the Greek god of healing. So Jesus— seemingly out of nowhere— in a conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus brings up this striking image of the bronze snake on the pole made by Moses. Jesus said it was "lifted up." And just as the bronze serpent of Moses was *lifted up*, so the Son of Man must be *lifted up*.

There are literally about five big things going on in this single sentence. Perhaps the most important thing— especially during Lent— is that Jesus is here predicting his crucifixion, his death, his passion. The first time. Now, this is a big deal because Jesus predicted his passion three times. And it's told by Mark and Matthew and Luke in one way. Just two weeks ago, we had a sermon on the first passion prediction according to Mark. *He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.* Today we have the first of three passion predictions according to John. In a very real sense, today we are getting John's version of Jesus' first passion prediction, as opposed to Mark's version which we had two weeks ago.

And next Sunday, we will have the third passion prediction according to John. The key verse next Sunday will be: "*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*" So, in *John's gospel*, Jesus three times says that he, the Son of Man, will be lifted up. John chapter three, chapter eight, and next Sunday, chapter twelve. The three passion predictions according to John. None of them uses the word cross, or even the word death, but instead [they] use the word "lifted up."

So if you were to come to church regularly, if you were really an ace student, an ace Lutheran, an ace investigator of the gospel according to John, you would notice that today, Nicodemus

visits Jesus by night, and is confused by what Jesus says. Jesus says that the Son of Man must be lifted up like the serpent of Moses. *Next week*, Jesus will tell some other people— *not* Nicodemus— that when he is lifted up, he will *draw all people* to himself. And then, *on Good Friday*, in the passion according to John, when Jesus is on the cross, Nicodemus will come forward in broad daylight, *drawn* to Jesus.

This phrase “lifted up” is the passion prediction of Jesus in the gospel of John. It’s so critical that scholars have spent a lot of effort trying to reconstruct the word in the original Aramaic. You’re all aware that the New Testament is not originally in English, but our English translation comes from Greek. But Jesus and his apostles didn’t speak Greek, they spoke Aramaic, so on these really crucial phrases— phrases like *this is my body given for you* or *Our Father in heaven* the scholars try to reconstruct Jesus’ original words in the original language that he spoke, even though we don’t have his words in the original language, only in Greek. And they’ve done that with this verb, *lifted up*, because it is so crucial to our understanding.

I said that there are about five big things going on in this sentence. John 3:14. (Forget about John 3:16.) The first thing is that Jesus is predicting his death. The second thing is that by using the verb “lifted up” Jesus is conflating his crucifixion and his glorification. “Lifted up” means to be hoisted on the cross, a gruesome instrument of capital punishment. But it also means to be celebrated, to be adored, to be exalted, ...to be glorified. In fact, in John 3:13 Jesus refers to his ascension in the past tense, and now he refers to being “lifted up” in the future tense, so Jesus is messing with our understanding of sequential time AND he is conflating— blurring— the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension all into one event.

So if Nicodemus or someone responded to John 3:16 by saying that God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life— if Nicodemus asked Jesus does eternal life come from the crucifixion, OR does eternal life come from the resurrection, OR does eternal life come from the ascension to God’s right hand, Jesus’ answer would be “Yes.” Eternal life comes from the lifting up of the Son of Man. And all of those things— crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension are the lifting up.

Two weeks ago, according to Mark, we heard Jesus tell Peter and the apostles: *The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, AND be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, AND the scribes, AND be killed, AND after three days rise again.* And, and, and. The grammatical term is polysyndeton. It emphasizes the sequence and the separation of the events that sequentially order as Holy Week. Palm Sunday to Maundy Thursday to Good Friday to Easter. Mark’s gospel. Today in this one sentence, in this one verb — “lifted up” — Jesus is saying it’s all one action. It is ALL God’s saving love in a single action.

It MUST be this way. MUST is the word both in Mark and John. *The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, AND, AND, AND, AND.* That’s Mark first passion prediction. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so MUST the Son of Man be lifted up. That’s *John’s* first passion prediction.

And just AS you would not think that a poisonous snake would be a symbol of healing— but then you read about it in the books of Moses, and you read about it in Greek mythology— just as you would think that the snake that brings poison is an odd way to give healing and life, so it is that the death of Jesus on a cross— Good Friday— is an odd way to be victorious. But it is God’s way. The Son of Man *MUST* be lifted up.

So let’s wrap this up. The great tragedy of John 3:16 is that it is taken out of context and it is turned into a blueprint for personal salvation. I remember seeing Billy Graham preach this Nicodemus story and I thought, “Wow, he is a great preacher.” Not only Billy Graham, but Martin Luther did this. They take John 3:16 as the encapsulation of the way to get saved. Personal salvation.

But when they do that, they leave out John 3:14, John 3:15, and John 3:17. Which are equally important. John 3:14— today’s sermon— is about the mystery and the irony of the passion. It is the stubborn refusal to separate crucifixion from resurrection. To separate Good Friday from Easter.

John 3:15 is about eternal life. The “lifting up” brings eternal life for believers. Just as the serpent of Moses made it possible for those who were poisoned to *live*. You already have the promise of eternal life in John 3:15. John 3:16 is about the motive: LOVE! This *MUST* happen, verse fourteen says. Why? LOVE, verse sixteen says. You already got your salvation in John 3:15. John 3:16 tells you why. And then John 3:17. This isn’t just good for you, personally and privately. This is for the sake of the world. Or in the original Greek, the *cosmos*. The creation. The whole universe. That the whole universe might be saved.

On Good Friday, our first lesson will be from Isaiah. It will begin

See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. Just as there were many who were astonished at him-- so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals-

The opening scripture on Good Friday. Today’s gospel helps us to prepare for those words and what they truly mean for us and for the whole universe. Amen.