

John 3:14-21
Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 10, 2024

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

Our text, from John 3, beginning with these words of Jesus, “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.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

How many sermons throughout the Church militant this morning (including this sermon) will start with recognition of how beloved are the words of John 3:16? And rightly so! – encapsulates the Gospel, easily memorized by the children, kept in the heart all our lives, especially comforting during the Lenten season as we near Holy Week. (If you love it because you see it at sporting events, you love it for the wrong reason... but even that shows how widely recognized and cherished is the verse.)

And yet, how misunderstood and misused that verse can be when not read in context of the rest of John 3! Especially in our American context, people cherish the first phrase – “God so loved the world” – and they cherish the third phrase – “whoever believes in Him” – but they tend to join those two phrases together to make their personal decision for Jesus, while leaving out the centrality of Jesus – “[God] gave His only Son.”

Yes, in our context of American Christianity and its poor doctrine's emphasis on personal decisions and giving one's life to God, so many love to hear the first phrase of that verse "God so loved"... combine it with the last phrase of the verse, "whoever believes in him" and see that as a mathematical equation of saving one's self by choosing Jesus. In such ways the middle phrase, "He gave His only Son" becomes nothing but a tool to see if one will believe in the object and so prove his worth before the God who loves and so desperately wants you to make the right decision.

Notice, then, what has happened to this passage that so beautifully encapsulates salvation by grace alone? – it has been turned into a test to see if you will make the right decision. It has been turned into a contract between you and God, Christ not being the mediator and advocate for the sinner, but simply being the showpiece and trophy that proves the Christian's great faith. Where you proudly and boldly make your decision for God, you walk into daily life with puffed-up arrogance about dedicating your life to Jesus, but then when you live daily life, reflect upon it and self-examine, you are shocked to find how poorly you have dedicated your life to Christ, and soon you begin to wonder, doubt, and despair whether God could really love you when you have been such a sad example of "believing in Him," in Christ.

Indeed, it's no wonder that American Christianity can sometimes be referred to as a gateway drug to atheism, because – if I can't live up to the faith in Christ I'm supposed to have, can't always be exuberant in the heart's yearning for the spiritual life to show God I'm worth loving, then I will be condemned with the rest of the world and might as well ignore the coming judgment, pretend *it* and the God who judges doesn't exist.

But, St John says, "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him." If you see your faith in Christ as something constantly measured by God on the weigh-scales of divine justice to see if you're worth saving, you will learn to hate and despise this text and everything it captures and conveys to sinners in need.

But, if you really want to love John 3:16, learn to hear it in the context of the rest of the chapter, especially verses 14-21 (our text), but even that – as we shall see – must be heard in light of what comes before it.

Let us start with what immediately comes before verse 16, the first words of our text (though, importantly, not of the chapter): "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Certainly, you see the parallels and know how central this image is to our proper understanding of Christ's universal atonement for all mankind. All mankind was

snake-bitten by the serpent in the garden, and the poison and venom courses through each of us in the line of Adam. While the general image of the snake-bitten laying on the ground before Moses and dying as a result of their sin is the overarching comparison Christ makes in our text, we can even make a comparison with Adam and Eve in the text – growing bored with the food divinely given in the perfection of Eden, lamenting over *it* and being enticed by the serpent to desire something not graciously provided by the Lord.

Moreso than just comparing our Old Testament reading to Adam and Eve, we can see ourselves in it, struck by the death of sin, and having no hope but to despair of ourselves and admit our wretchedness, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD.” Yes, spoken in daily life – by thought, word, and deed... by things done and left undone... we have sinned against the LORD, and – even if we could deceive ourselves into thinking we only sinned once (or a few times) in an otherwise faithful life – nevertheless, fully deserving of death, as proven by the snake-bite.

We have sinned against the LORD, and our *only* hope is that the holy God is also merciful: “Moses, pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents [and their sting of death] from us.”

Yes, that's the amazing truth about the sinner's lot – that repentance does not imply despair; it certainly implies desperation (and rightly so!), but it also implies *hope*.

But, is it a delusion to hope in God? Are we simply hallucinating in the moments before condemnation and death? Or is there reason to hope in God?

The Lord gives us reason and says, "Here, in the image of the fiery serpent upon the pole... in the image of all your sins being crucified, being placed upon a sin-bearer and that sin-bearer being crushed for your transgressions... *there* – and only there – is your reason for hope." Or, as our text says it,

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up" ... and *that* explains the beginning of verse 16, "For God *in this way* (the word translated "so" should not be read "quantitatively" – not "so much"; it should be read "qualitatively" – "in this way")... God, in this way loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son."

There is your hope. There is your salvation. Indeed, there is the salvation of the whole world – "God so loved *the world*." We refer to this as "universal atonement." "Christ died as the propitiation for our sin," St John's epistle says, "and not only for our sins, but for the sins of the whole world." Again, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the

world through Him.” And if for the whole world, then there can be no doubt that He died for you, too.

But, now, here’s where doubt *does* enter in: “...that whoever believes in him.” And American Christianity hears that and lectures you: “prove it! Prove you believe in him. Prove how much you love him. Prove the genuineness of your heart! If you can’t prove you believe in him, you will be condemned. Your certainty lies in your Christian life, your great decision-making, your faith walk and life of obedience. Prove it!”

Suddenly, all the beauty of the universal atonement has been swept away. All the comfort of the central image of the cross has faded into the background, and all I can see is the emptiness of my heart. You see what American Christianity has done; it has taken your great hope in the snake-bitten being able to look at the object of their hope, and it has demanded the snake-bitten to examine whether they are hoping purely enough, strongly enough to win God’s favor. And if to win God’s favor, then there’s no reason for God to provide the image of a sin-bearer; who needs a sin-bearer if you can win God’s favor by demonstrating how well you keep those words, “whoever believes in Him.”

Yet, we must acknowledge: there those words stand. And not just those words, but the words that come after: “This is the

judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.” We must admit: universal atonement does not mean all mean are saved. Is there not clear demarcation between the unfaithful and the faithful? Are we not called to live lives of faith and holiness “so that it may be clearly seen that [one’s] deeds have been carried out in God”? Far be it from us to imply that the universal atonement means that the unbelieving, too, are saved... that a daily life of wickedness and sinful revelry is excused by the cross of Christ! Do not all the Scriptures speak of justifying faith and its joy in holy living? Does not Jesus himself qualify it thus, “Whoever believes in Me...”? Would it not be the most horrible false preaching to say, “Jesus died for all. Go live a godless, faithless life, for Jesus saves all!” – No, even our text says, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

But if the universal atonement only benefits those who believe, are you not again terror-stricken at the condition of your heart? Are you not thrown into great doubt when you see the sins of daily life? Are you not again focused on, turned inward on, the faith or lack of faith found in your heart and its imperfect Christian love? And such self-examination pendulum-swings us

from pride to despair, back and forth we go, somewhere between self-righteous pietism and despairing depression... with very fleeting moments in which we think it's just the right level of faith and love. What a hopelessly uncertain venture! So, where is our certainty, where is our comfort?

It is found in recalling that there are more verses than just our text. It is found in recalling that Jesus has already gently rebuked any notion that we can create faith of ourselves, gain heaven ourselves, analyze and make our own decisions for and see the kingdom of heaven. How does Jesus say it to Nicodemus in the verses preceding our text: "Unless one is begotten from above he cannot see the kingdom of God." And, again, he expounds on that, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." In other words, holy baptism grants us the gift of faith; holy baptism puts us in relationship with God that we can appeal to him with confidence, "Pray to the LORD, that He may take away the serpents from us." Holy Baptism gives us the confidence that that which has been achieved universally has also been applied to us individually – indeed, Holy Baptism *is* the individual application.

Consider what we meditated upon last week – how Christ's zeal for the temple translated into his raising up of His own body *and* His zeal for *your* body as He has connected it to

Himself in holy baptism – making your body his temple, so that whatever is secured and won by Him is your inheritance as well.

That was John 2. Now, very next chapter, we have the same promise confirmed. You are an heir of the kingdom of heaven through the birth of water and the spirit. Whatever is accomplished in the heavenly courtroom for all mankind is therefore individually applied to you as a baptized heir. And, therefore, you may have all boldness and confidence that you may appeal to God, “Let us pray to the LORD, that he may take away the serpents [and the sting of death] from us”... you may appeal with confidence, for He will hold the image of the cross of Christ before your eyes and say,

“Here, look upon Him, for through Him I have secured your salvation. Look upon this and trust My Word, for I have promised the good news that the Messiah has been chosen to take upon himself your sins, and He has accomplished that. In this way I have loved the world; in this way He has redeemed the world; and in holy baptism you have been tied to him, that you may believe my promises that are all tied to and have been carried out in Him, in the body I have given Him to do my will. There it is upon the cross in history; there it is upon the altar in real-time for you! Hear the good news, receive the holy gift – “This is My body; this is my blood – for you... for forgiveness, life, and salvation.”

Is there any room left to turn inward and judge the unworthiness of your heart? Of course your heart is unworthy! If it were worthy, then Christ would have died for no reason. But, unworthy though it is, it may cling to and rejoice in the One who is worthy. It may look upon the sin-bearer and live. It may gaze upon Christ crucified – not as a tool to see if you are believing firmly enough – but as the source of salvation for the whole world... and, if for the whole world, then for you, too.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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