

Numbers 21:4-9  
John 3:14-21

“Gazing in Wonder”

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You may well be familiar with the account we shared from John’s Gospel. The Pharisee, Nicodemus, comes to Jesus at night. Nicodemus is not just anybody; he is a prominent person in the synagogue and in the community in Jerusalem. He’s an inquiring, intelligent sort of person.

Maybe that is why he comes to Jesus at night – Perhaps he doesn’t want anybody to see him with Jesus. As a Pharisee, he too has likely been openly critical of this ‘renegade rabbi.’ Yet Jesus, recognizing Nicodemus for who he is, calls him a “teacher of Israel” as their conversation continues.

Of course, you and I and know - as Jesus knew - that sometimes people who teach don’t like to admit that there is anything THEY can be taught! Surely, that is not why I am now labeled a “teaching elder” in the Presbyterian Church . . . Hum.

But let’s take a look at Nicodemus in a positive light. He comes to Jesus at night, OUT of the dark. Jesus has already been introduced in John’s Gospel as light – the light of the world – light coming into our darkness. So we might assume on that positive note, that Nicodemus came to Jesus to be ... ‘enlightened.’ At least he takes the initiative to engage Jesus in conversation. Then as learned man who apparently is open to learning more, he repeatedly asks Jesus, “How can this be?” “How can this be?”

Nicodemus seems to want Jesus to explain himself. And in the course of this report of their nocturnal conversation comes one of the greatest statements of Christian faith: “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.” (3:16). But, what does that mean? How can this be? How can this enigmatic, wandering, homeless Rabbi be God’s saving answer to what’s wrong in the world. Again, maybe a bit like Nicodemus, we too wonder, how can this be?

If Nicodemus was seeking some straightforward, simple explanation, he is surely disappointed. Jesus responds to him by alluding to some strange event way back in the obscure book of Numbers as the Israelites were making their exodus out of Egyptian slavery, through the desert to the Promised Land. The people, now out in the wilderness, make complaint about the actions – or more precisely - the lack of action on the part of Moses and God. Even though God and Moses have brought them out of Egyptian slavery, they are now wandering in that **wilderness, rather aimlessly, with too little food and too little water, and they**

just don't like it. So they let out a barrage of complaints against God, as if God had NOT just delivered them from their bondage in Egypt, not to mention rescuing them from the Egyptian armies who were in hot pursuit.

In punishment for their complaining, Numbers 21 says that God sent poisonous serpents which bit and slew many of the people. The people then let out a wail of lamentation, or as we say in our house when the grandsons complain in that manner – “they were speaking ‘whinn-ese.’” So God tells Moses to construct a bronze serpent, put it on a pole, and have the people GAZE upon it. When they do, they are healed of the poisonous snake bites. Hence, the serpent on the pole becomes the symbol of healing, Ne-hush-tan; the symbol used still to this day by our medical profession.

A poisonous serpent is a frightening image of harm and evil to us, not to mention that it was a serpent that got us all in trouble in the Garden of Eden. And yet the bronze serpent, the image of temptation and evil, became, in the wisdom of God, an image of healing and salvation. That bronze serpent would eventually be smashed by Moses because the people were worshipping it as an idol. However, that same snake on a pole is referred to in the Wisdom of Solomon as the symbol of salvation. . . .

In like manner a wooden cross is also a frightening image of one of the worst forms of punishment humanity has ever devised against its own species. And, yet in the healing providence of God, the cross is the sign of God's deepest, most costly love. It's amazing isn't it, how God can take most vile and retched of items, like serpents and a wooden cross, and transform them into symbols that stand for healing and salvation. It might lead one to believe that our good, loving God can transform anything! Even us!

Jesus tells Nicodemus that just as the people of Israel were saved by gazing upon that bronze serpent, so Israel and the whole world will be saved. Just as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness to save the Israelites, so the Son of Man will be “lifted up.” As we know, in just a couple of weeks, Jesus WILL be “lifted up.” He shall rise, but not at first in glory, but rather on a humiliating, gory cross. .

We note that Jesus does not give Nicodemus an explanation for his reference to this rather obscure passage from the book of Numbers. Neither does he offer a clear definition of who he is as the Messiah, or how he shall save the world as a Savior. Rather, he offers a strange, mysterious image - an image that links us back to the history of the salvation of Israel. What happened out there in the

wilderness as the people GAZED upon that serpent is something beyond explanation. . . yet, so too is the cross of Christ.

Poisonous serpents . . . a strange snake on a pole that heals . . . a crucified Savior of the world . . . I'm sorry if you have come here this morning seeking straightforward answers, simple explanations, or a clearer understanding of the mystery that is the Christian faith. I'm sorry because I don't think you'll get it from the Gospel of John today; and therefore I don't think you will get it from this sermon. But what you might get is a vision, a glimpse into the heart of God, a peak at God's intentions for us and our world. It seems to me that here, Jesus says, we are not to attempt to analyze, define and explain him and his saving work. We are to do what the Israelites did with the bronze serpent in the wilderness: We are to look upon him. We are to gaze at this mystery, and allow it to move within us.

So many times when we approach the Bible, we do so as historians, or as news reporters or as scientists. We have often read a text, and asked questions like, When did this happen? Why did this happen? What is the context for what is going on here? And occasionally, our scientific, prove-it-to-me side of the brain "kicks in" and we ask, DID this really happen?

But such historical, news-acquiring, scientific questions, put to a Biblical text - as interesting as they can be - may not always be the appropriate questions. History and news and science may not be the means whereby we get to the heart of the matter. We might be better served if we approach the texts as poets, novelists or even as artists.

When we gaze upon some great work of art, we don't usually ask ourselves first, when was this painted? Who painted it, and what was the painter's context? What is the idea that this painting is trying to convey? Rather, we simply look at the painting - we gaze at it. We let the work make an impression on us and let it speak to us. It becomes more of an emotional experience than an intellectual experience, at least when we first gaze upon it. Often, that is the way we are invited to look at a Biblical text.

John began this poetic Gospel saying that Jesus is the light - the light coming into the darkness. Then throughout the rest of this Gospel Jesus is encountered by people like Nicodemus who look at Jesus, but have difficulty seeing him for who he really is - the light of God coming into the world. Yet for those who dare to look upon him as the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus will draw them to himself in the magnetic field of his love - just as he has drawn Nicodemus out of the night into an enlightening conversation.

Yet, as is said in this Sunday's text, Jesus comes not to condemn the world, but to save it. Perhaps as a break from the usual stress upon our sin and need for repentance that Lent usually brings, today's gospel brings us an opportunity to simply gaze upon Jesus, lifted up on a cross for our salvation; yet not only the salvation of those who are in the church, but indeed for the whole world – the whole of God's good created order.

In today's scripture we are not asked to do anything heroic for God. Rather, we are simply asked to behold what God has done, and is doing, and will do for us in the cross of Christ. We are not asked to boldly step up and declare as to whether we have decided for or against Christ. We are simply asked to look up and gaze as we imagine the crucified Christ with his arms outstretched. They are outstretched as a welcome – as an invitation for us to come and receive his warm, saving embrace.

Some Sundays, particularly during this season of Lent, we are encouraged to be engaged in self-examination. But this Sunday, in overhearing this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, we are urged to gaze upon Christ. We are not to understand him, but rather to behold him, to adore him, and to allow him to draw us into the scope of his salvation.

At the beginning of this sermon, I said that we probably already know this story of this visit by night by Nicodemus. Maybe we know this story because it is a story that we are living in our own lives right now. Into whatever darkness we dwell, light has dawned. And now we too come out of our personal darkness to seek the light of him who is the light of the world. The Son of Man has been lifted up before us, lifted up on a cross. And there we behold him in mortal agony, this one who is the best person who has ever lived. How could one like him end up on a horrible cross? How could his cross be the solution to the problems between us and God?

Such questions are beyond explanation. So perhaps we are not to attempt to explain the use of mysterious images of our salvation. Rather we are to look upon the cross. We are to allow this searing image to have its way with us – to penetrate deep into our souls and thereby to be drawn to Christ – to be drawn near to God, so that we 'should not perish, but have eternal life.'

I read recently that one of the highlights of the liturgical year at the Duke University Chapel is what occurs there each Palm/Passion Sunday morning. The worship service begins with the typical special music presented by the University Choir as they process in depicting the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the congregation waving palms and singing their 'Hosannas.'

But then, since the students will not be there on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday because of Easter break, the service begins to transform and focus on the week of Jesus' passion. It all leads up to the narrative about the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. It becomes a service which is centered in the intensity and honesty of the tragedy of that final week of Jesus' earthly life.

The truth of what happened often becomes almost more than the worshippers can bear, and some feel tears welling up in their eyes. All are left wondering, "How could this have happened to the Son of God?" "What is our role in this account?" "Does the life of Jesus of Nazareth really need to end in this violent, cataclysmic way?"

At the end of the service, the choir that had led the music so beautifully at the beginning, recesses from the chapel in complete silence. They are led by two students carrying a large crucifix. They walk out down the center aisle, in full view of the congregation. So the whole congregation gazes upon that cross in silence.

One worshipper remarked afterward, "It is a powerful moment." "It was as if the whole worship service was saying, 'This truth is too deep. God's love for us as shown on the cross is too inexplicable.'" "All we can do is to just stand there, GAZE in wonder upon it, and to say, not how or why, but simply, "This is truth for me."":

"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." "How can this be? How can this be?" Amen.