

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, March 15, 2015

**Nicodemus, This Is What It's All About**

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

As I read our two scripture passages from Numbers and John's gospel, did you note two unusual things?

In the reading from Numbers, people were dying of bites from poisonous snakes and they asked Moses to pray to God to end this plague. God told Moses to fashion a serpent of bronze, put it on a pole, and whenever someone was bitten they would live if they looked up at the bronze serpent.

Rather strange isn't it? God telling Moses to make what seems to be an idol. Didn't God come down hard on Aaron for making a golden calf? And now God says to make a bronze snake. The difference, of course, is that the golden calf was made to be worshipped as a false god while the snake was simply a sign of God's mercy. It is important to note however that in later times, in the days of King Hezekiah, the Israelites forgot the purpose of the bronze serpent. They actually began to worship it as a god forgetting why it was created in the first place and it had to be destroyed, just as the golden calf had been. In 2 Kings 18:4 we read, *"He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it."* (NIV)

Our reading from John is also unusual. I am quite sure that you recognized the very familiar John 3:16 words: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

What is so unusual about that? We all know and understand those words. We see them everywhere, particularly on billboards of the evangelical churches and on highway signs. Often, we just see "John 3:16" and we know what it means, or do we?

That single line of scripture, to many people, has become like the bronze snake. It has become an object of worship itself, rather than being what it is --- a recognition that Christ is the one we must look up to and worship, not just a few words out of scripture. The becomes very clear when we read the next verse, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who

believes may have eternal life in him.” The illusion to Jesus being lifted up on the cross in the clear implication of this second verse but it also suggests the ascension after his resurrection.

All of that said, who exactly uttered these words? John? No, not at all. They were the words of Jesus, not someone else’s words said after the crucifixion.

Jesus was clearly saying why God had sent him --- to save the world. He was explaining his purpose not to a group of followers, or even to the apostles, but to a Pharisee named Nicodemus. He was saying, “Nicodemus, this is what it’s all about.” These were words spoken to a member of the Jewish ruling council, not to his followers. Here he was telling a Pharisee that he was the Son of God and that he was sent to save the world. He is also alluding to what was going to happen before he returned to the Father. If a bronze snake was strange, this had to be mind boggling to Nicodemus. Jesus mentions the bronze snake to Nicodemus for, as a Pharisee, it was something he could easily relate to as a symbol of God’s power, not as an idol. The healing power of the snake, according to William Barclay<sup>1</sup>, “... *lay not in the bronze serpent; it was only a symbol to turn their thoughts to God; and when they did that they were healed.*”

Barclay goes on to say, “*The serpent was lifted up; the people looked at it; their thoughts were turned to God; and by the power of that God in whom they trusted, they were healed. Even so Jesus must be lifted up; and when people turn their thoughts to him, and believe in him, they too will find eternal life.*”

“*There is a wonderfully suggestive thing here. The verb ‘to lift up’ ... is used of Jesus in two senses. It is used of his being ‘lifted up on the cross;’ and it is used of his being ‘lifted up into glory’ at the time of his ascension into heaven ... There was a double lifting up in Jesus life --- the lifting on the cross and the lifting into glory. And the two are inextricably connected. The one could not have happened without the other. For Jesus, the cross was the way to glory: had he refused it, had he evaded it, had he taken steps to escape it, as he might easily have done, there would have been no glory for him. It is the same for us. We can, if we like, refuse the cross that every Christian has been called to bear; but if we do, we lose the glory. It is an unalterable law of life that if there is no cross, there is no crown.*”

Of course, Jesus couldn’t tell all of this to Nicodemus --- it wouldn’t have made sense to him talking about things which were yet to happen. Nicodemus knew nothing

about the forthcoming crucifixion and certainly not about the resurrection and ascension but he certainly could understand the words of John 3:16.

Nicodemus knew about the various miracles and signs performed by Jesus. He said to him, *“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”*

Nicodemus understood that God had sent Jesus. What he didn't understand was that Jesus was the Son of God. Nicodemus undoubtedly looked upon Jesus as a prophet, much like the prophets of old, but now Jesus was telling him exactly who he was and in John 3:16 he gives us, and Nicodemus, the essence of the gospel in just 26 words. These 26 words tell us that all salvation comes from God. It is a message of love. God sent his Son because of love for his world.

According to Barclay, these 26 words tell us *“... that the mainspring of God's being is love ... it shows us that God (is) acting not for his own sake but for ours; not to satisfy his desire for power, not to bring a universe to heel, but to satisfy his love.*

*“It tells us of the width of the love of God. It was the world that God so loved. It was not a nation; it was not the good people; it was not only the people who loved him; it was the world.”*

Did Nicodemus understand this? Probably not in its entirety but he certainly understood that Jesus was holy. He defended Jesus before the Jewish council and after the crucifixion he asked for Jesus' body and arranged for his burial.

If he did not believe then, he certainly did three days later and said to himself. “Nicodemus, this is what it is all about.”

We know what it is all about, We have 20-20 hindsight. Nicodemus had 20-20 foresight after Jesus talked to him.

**Amen.**

1. William Barclay, “The Gospel of John”, vol. 1, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2001

Note: All scriptural quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011