



Woodcut reproduction by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872).

Lent 4

Opening Prayer

Steadfast God, you reach out to us in mercy even when we rebel against your holy call and prefer to walk in disobedience rather than in the way of your divine truth. Soften our hearts with the warmth of your love, that we may know your Son is alive within us, redeeming us and raising us up into your eternal presence. Amen.

Before beginning this week's study, it may be of some benefit to recap last week's focus and findings, inviting the participants to share any thoughts they might have.

Onto the task at hand

Note: Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John's portrayal of the mission and ministry of Jesus is always related to the glorification of Jesus on the cross. In John's gospel, the crucifixion is not ostensibly the violent and horrific outcome of Jesus going head to head with the power of Caesar and the religious system that was in collaboration with the occupying power. For John, everything about the life and ministry of Jesus was a prelude to the cross and resurrection wherein Jesus became fully the Messiah and was revealed as such to the world. In John's gospel, the

crucifixion and the resurrection are not two separate acts, but one continuous act of exaltation (lifting up) and glorification.

This week's readings have more than a few challenges. The gospel contains a reference to the bizarre moment in Numbers, in which God sends poisonous snakes to punish a whining group of Israelites in the desert and then provides the cure for the punishment by having Moses fashion an icon with a bronze serpent on the end of a stick. We will also hear John 3:16, which is the warm and fuzzy quote known to anyone who has ever attended Sunday school or watched a sporting event on television. Sadly, however, the warm fuzzies disappear, and our image and concept of God reconciling the whole world to God's self is challenged. We will not likely solve all of the problems or make sense of all of the challenging bits, but hopefully we will grow through struggling with them.

With that disclaimer aside, let us get to work....

Ask a participant to read the following passage. Let the group sit in silence for a moment to reflect on what they have just heard, then have the passage read again, preferably in a different translation.

John 3:14–21

And just 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.

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.

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed

in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

In buzz groups of two to three people, have the participants talk for 5–7 minutes about the following questions:

- 1) What is going on here? What phrase or image strikes you the most?

Again, know that it may get a bit noisy at this point. Starting the study with a sense of energy is never a bad thing. The fact that John 3:16 is included in the reading will no doubt narrow the conversation. Perhaps the greatest challenge for the facilitator will be to move participants beyond the seemingly obvious.

Take some time to record thoughts, feelings and insights that came out of the conversations.

Now, on to the literary context.... As is most often the case with the lectionary, our gospel reading is plucked out of John's gospel to meet a liturgical purpose. It is always useful to look at the passage with respect to where it fits into the flow of the greater story. A teaching moment about the difference between the focus of John and the focus of the Synoptic Gospels (see above) might be useful. Next, it would be beneficial to set the gospel into the context of what comes just before our passage. Have a participant read John 3:1–21.

John 3:1–21

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just 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.

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Again, in buzz groups of two to three people, discuss the following question for 8–10 minutes:

- 1) When our gospel passage for today is linked with the verses that come before it in John, what new insights emerge?

Once again, record any insights and thoughts that emerge.

Teaching Moment

The following material from Timothy Simpson (“Political Theology Today,” March 2012) is useful background material for the facilitator. A modified, précised version of the political context of this passage would be instructive for participants.

The Historical and Political Context of the Passage

Despite its status with the general public, there are at least three important layers of politics in this text that are not widely known. The first is at the level of the narrative itself. The lectionary picks up the tale at verse 14, but the setting, beginning with the first verse of chapter three, has one Nicodemus coming after dark to talk privately with Jesus. The text says that he is both a Pharisee and a “leader of the Jews.” These are two politically significant identifiers that cast the

distinction between Jesus and his questioner in sharp relief. The Pharisees were a party devoted to strict observance of Torah, asserting that its observance, including activities usually reserved for priests, should not be limited to the priestly class in and around the temple but observed by all Jews in all circumstances. Judea at the time of the story was a Roman province and thus under foreign occupation. The Pharisaic call for increased Torah piety was not simply a call to deeper religious observance but also a call to nationalistic resistance to the outsiders who had increasingly become more intrusive in Jewish life. Modern Christians often fail to recall the status of the Jews under Rome and thus, failing to see the patriotism in the Pharisaic position, mistakenly chalk up their concern for Torah to a simple-minded legalism and a slavish adherence to law for the purpose of salvation, being all the while ignorant of grace, which the Jews would later learn about from Christians. This is a caricature of the Pharisees, whose thinking was anything but simplistic, as one can tell by reading the Apostle Paul, who was trained as a Pharisee and who became early Christianity's leading thinker.

As was mentioned, in addition to being a Pharisee, the text also describes Nicodemus as being “a leader of the Jews.” Presumably this means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, although the narrator does not say this for reasons I will discuss below. The Sanhedrin was the Jewish ruling council to which the Romans had given responsibility for much of the minutia of governance in matters pertaining to the Jewish faith. Judaism had been granted, as an ancient religion that predated Rome itself, an exemption (*religio licita*) from being compelled to participate in the state religious cults. One of the primary responsibilities of the Sanhedrin was the administration of the temple and all of its ancillary activities. The Pharisees were a

minority party in the Sanhedrin; its majority was made up of Sadducees—religious conservatives who rejected everything but the books of Moses as canon, thus rejecting out of hand any talk of Messiah—who were widely held to be collaborators with Rome, at least later in the century, as we learn from Josephus. Nicodemus is part of the minority, but he is in government nonetheless. So his coming to Jesus at night suggests an awareness on his part that coming during the day would likely have consequences for his reputation. But that he would still come and seek out Jesus like this further suggests that whatever power and prestige Nicodemus possesses is inadequate, at least on some level; otherwise, he would not be there.

But there is another level of politics involved in this passage. The Gospel of John has long been known for its late date of composition in the first century. By the time of its composition, the Sadducees had been swept from power and the Romans had destroyed both the city of Jerusalem and the temple, the cash cow of Sadducean prosperity. The Sanhedrin was thus no more, which may be why the narrator calls Nicodemus “a leader of the Jews” rather than making him a Sanhedrin member. The narrative thus comes in on two “channels”—the level of the story set around 30 CE and the level of the original reader, who would have lived around 90 CE, with the second level cutting even more sharply than the first. For, in the reader's time, it is the Pharisees who are in ascendance, and the early Jesus movement is being harried by them. The repeated references in John to being “thrown out of the synagogue” (e.g., 9:22, 12:42, 16:2), which may reflect the promulgation within Pharasaic Judaism of the *Birkhat Ha-Minim* (lit., “A Prayer for the Heretics”), a statement barring the Christians from the synagogues, which many scholars date to this time. In any case, what we have here for the original audience of

this text is somebody from the party that has just kicked the Jesus movement to the curb coming to Jesus himself trying to grasp what is going on in Jesus' teaching, addressing him with the honorific "Rabbi," admitting that Jesus has been "sent from God," and furthermore, that "no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God" (v. 2). That the Pharisaic leader doesn't "get it" is part of the politics of the story on both levels, in the manner of traditional folk tales in which the powerful are shown to be incompetent. But the Johannine story's extraction of these three affirmations from Nicodemus is a very big deal, akin to Rush Limbaugh admitting the veracity of human-made climate change.

But he does not "get it" and we can forgive him if he doesn't because Jesus here is talking about a whole other frame of reference than Nicodemus imagines. Jesus starts the pivot to that different frame in his enigmatic statement that the kingdom of God will only be seen by those "Born again" or "born from above" (v.3), and in this move he completely loses Nicodemus, who then all but disappears from the scene, except for the bewildered statement "How can these things be?" in v. 9. From there on out Jesus seems to be as much talking to the readers off the page as he is to any character within it. And his new frame of reference becomes clearer the more he speaks. The church has always known, from the Council of Nicaea to Rudolf Bultmann, that John's Christ is a Cosmic Christ, and it is such a Christ that is presented to Nicodemus (and the reader) not simply a Jewish Messiah. Nicodemus comes looking for some clarification of traditional Jewish teaching; but he has no idea that he is speaking to the Pre-existent Logos (John 1). He's a Pharisee, and thus accepts the prophets as canon, and so is looking for the Messiah. But what is revealed to him is not what anyone had had in mind heretofore about what Messiah was

all about. Jesus invokes the famous episode of the Serpent on the Rod from Numbers (this week's OT lection), which being lifted up amid the people, removes their sickness. But, in the shift in the simile, the Son of Man, Jesus, becomes that which must be lifted up, and the life that is offered is now eternal (v. 14). Nicodemus, if he is hearing any of this, would doubtless not have known how to respond because the offer of eternal life was something new.

It is here that the third layer of politics emerges in John 3, namely the application which the text makes for salvation, ostensibly of the entire cosmos. God's plan for the "only begotten Son" is universal salvation. It is a beautiful notion, and doubtless is the root of John 3:16's widespread popularity. God's "plan" may have started with the Jews, but it now includes everyone, a welcome development if you're not Jewish, which by the time John was written applied to more and more adherents with each passing decade. Yet tucked in with the sweetness of salvation is proffered the bitter pill of possible judgment. Jesus goes to great lengths to disavow the idea, stating in v. 16 and then restating in v. 17 the assertions that God does not want anyone to "perish" or "to condemn" any one. God, rather, is all about saving the world. Yet what Jesus offers with one hand he takes away with another. We aren't told what it means to "perish" here, only that God isn't for it. As it turns out, the promised salvation, in reality, will only be for those "who believe in him...in the name of the only Son of God" (v. 18) As the passage winds down, it is quite clear that while universal salvation may well be on offer here, there are unmistakably people who are outsiders, there being a binary world of those who "believe" and who are thus in the "light" and those who don't and aren't. Moreover, the failure to be in the light is neither benign happenstance nor ignorance, but is rather because these outsiders "hate the light"

and “love the darkness,” as malign an ascription of intentionality as ever there was one.

In the end, John 3 presents a very troubling political-theological landscape: there is us and there is them, and “them” are where they are because they hate what we stand for. The warm and fuzzy feeling that is generally associated with John 3:16 can only be maintained if one stops reading right there. It gets divisive and not very loving thereafter.

The following questions should be discussed in small groups (15–20 minutes):

- 1) With this new information, what might be going on in this passage? How does this information help us make sense of a very tricky bit of scripture?
- 2) Do you see a problem for those of us living in a multicultural, pluralistic society confronting the notion of “us” and “them”? What are the implications for a world threatened by religious intolerance and hatred? Where are the warm fuzzies?
(At the time of writing this study, members of ISIS were murdering thousands of people, Christian and Muslims alike, beheading children and kidnapping young women because they hate who they are and what they stand for.)

Record the highlights of the conversation.

More literary context: This passage cannot be read and understood without reference to the passage from Numbers. Have a participant read the following passage.

Numbers 21:4–9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people

became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Teaching Moment

The above seems an odd, and indeed nasty, story of a God who seems petulant in the face of the moaning and groaning of God’s people. In response to their tiresome murmuring, God sends poisonous snakes to put them in their place. Feeling adequately chastised, the people apologize, and God gives Moses the cure: a bronze snake on the end of a stick. The bitten and dying need only look at the serpent lifted high on a pole and they would live. *No, really!*

While the story is difficult to digest, it does give a pattern that is fairly consistent in both the Old and New Testaments: disobedience, suffering (punishment/consequences), repentance, faithfulness, life (new life).

In small groups, have the participants discuss the following questions (10 minutes):

- 3) What new understanding emerges when we read the gospel passage in relation to the story of Moses in the wilderness with a whining people? How do we relate the story of Moses in the wilderness to the saving nature of the crucifixion of the Son of Man?

Record the highlights and any insights that develop from conversations.

Taking It home

At this point, we are well into our Lenten journey. Lent is a time in which the church invites us to journey with honesty and openness into the brokenness of our lives and of the world around us. In our scripture readings today, the remedy for the sickness and suffering of the Israelites, and their restoration to wholeness, was to look at the figure of a bronze serpent on a pole. John tells Nicodemus that the remedy for the sickness and suffering of the whole world, its restoration to wholeness and the possibility of eternal life, rests on the crucifixion and

resurrection of Jesus. The cure for snakes is a snake. The cure for human brokenness is the sacrifice of one man's life. The cure for death is death.

The final questions could be dealt with either in small groups or in plenary (10–15 minutes):

- 4) What does all of this say to those of us who are making our way through Lent and trying to make our way through life as followers of Jesus? How do these scriptures speak to us today?
- 5) What is demanded of me/us as I/we leave this place and continue my/our personal journey in faith?

Close with prayer for one another, for the church and for those we are called to love and to serve.

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