

March 14, 2021

John 3: 14-21

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“It’s All About Love”

Until Jesus came along, the biggest name in the biblical world was Moses. We mention Moses in our Christian teaching and preaching because you can’t move too far through the Old or New Testaments without a reference to him or to what Moses and the people experienced in their relationship with God. There is a good reason for this. The stories of Moses mirror our own stories. Let’s make the connection. Which of these experiences has been a part of your life somewhere along the way: a situation that is heading toward a deadend and you can see it, and the only thing you can count on is the hardship you’ll face as you head to that endpoint; or, the feeling of being lost, not sure which way to turn and not even certain where you are supposed to go; or, hanging everything on some promise but not really confident the promise or the one making it is going to come through? The stories of Moses took place so long ago but there is something deeply relevant for us in what happened to him and the people because we’ve traveled some of those same roads. As I’ve said “Jesus” is the name we lift up above all names, but Jesus often had his mind on Moses, too, like the passage we’ve read today. In the third chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus starts thinking about a strange Moses story. The time when Moses was in the wilderness with the people and he lifted a bronze snake up on a pole to save the people from death. It’s all very mysterious. And yet, Jesus recalls that Moses story because God is doing something similar through him. We will be rescued from the grip of death. If there’s still mystery in this, Jesus pulls the curtain back so we can see the glory of it. For all the oddness of the story about Moses and the snake on the pole, John’s gospel story is as beautiful and familiar as it can be. Why? Because “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.” (John 3:16) This is what immediately follows the snake story. In other words, the clearest expression of what God has done in Christ, John 3:16, comes immediately after the bizarre story of a snake in the hands of Moses in the middle of the wilderness. To borrow a phrase from the vernacular of our culture, “What’s up with that?”

In an effort to clear up some of the murkiness today, let’s look more deeply at the story of Moses and the people. They’d been wandering in the wilderness for some time and the people were tired. Their bellies were empty. Their throats were dry. Even though Moses led them out of their slavery under Egyptian’s Pharaoh, the people complained. Was this all Moses had to offer? They could not see what they had, only what they didn’t have. (Just to make the point, remember our own stories are so often reflected in theirs.) God decided that if complaining was all the people could do then maybe they should have something to really complain about, and poisonous snakes infected their camp. The result is what we would expect. It was frightening and hopeless, until God told Moses to make a serpent of bronze and lift it up, and when the people looked upon it they would be saved. Throughout all of the bible, the message God makes clear is that God never wants to destroy, or disappoint, or abandon us. Not when we’re hungry, not when we’re thirsty, not when we’re lost in the wilderness, not in any place or in the face of any threat does God intend to leave us to our own devices. In fact, we can look straight into the eyes of the very thing that threatens to bring about our end, and God will still redeem and save God’s people.

This past week I keep asking myself the question, “Where do we experience what that feels like? When does that happen; that some great fear threatens us and by the act of facing it head on we are rescued from the threat?” I couldn’t come up with a good answer. And so, I resigned myself to the fact that we’ll just have to do the best we can to figure all of this out and try our best to make sense of what Jesus is saying when he connects himself to the strange story of the snake on a pole. But then, there I was this past week sitting in a chair, as a medical professional was preparing to give me the first of my two COVID-19 vaccination shots. The venue I was in was a large space and many dozens of people were doing what I was doing. I was suddenly aware of the energy that was in that room. First of all, it was the largest gathering of people I’ve been a part of since this all began over one year ago. I couldn’t help but think, “Boy, I’ve really missed this, being with others and sharing in something we are experiencing together.” That, in itself, seemed to convey hope. Now, I’m just like everyone else when it comes to getting a shot. It’s not something I love to do, but a feeling welled up in me that I didn’t expect. As I turned my head slightly toward the person who was administering the vaccine, I wanted to say aloud, “Bring it on. Be solid with that needle today. We’re taking you head on coronavirus and we are going to make it.” So many in our nation and the world have lost so much. Families within our congregation have lost loved ones in this pandemic, and the toll is staggering, especially when it’s someone you know or someone you love. No vaccine can bring them back but as more of the world’s population is protected the sooner we return to living life in the way we want to and need to. When it comes to our bodies and our health, turning our focus to the vaccine is saving us.

God so loved the world that Christ is given so that we will have everlasting life. When Jesus is lifted up on the cross the suffering and death we see there will not be our end. We can face it straight on because God brings a saving power to the very thing that is our greatest threat. The salvation God gives to us doesn’t mean death

disappears. It's real, just like the snake bites were real in the wilderness long ago, death still hits us and when it's our life or the life of those we love, it hits us hard. But, it's not our end. This is why the Apostle Paul wrote, "Death, where is your victory? Where is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55) When Christ is lifted up on the cross the reality of death is right there for all to see, but it's hold on us is nothing. And why? Because God so loved the world.

Love is more than an antidote for death. Love is everything. It hurts to know that some have used the message of John 3:16 to threaten others, using it like a religious club. As if to say, "You'd better get your act together or God's gonna get you." The gospel says it beautifully, "God did not send the Son to condemn the world, but...that the world might be saved through him." We are halfway through our Lenten journey. We are on the road that will bring us near to a moment of such suffering and death it will seem more than anyone could bear. But it is there, at the cross, that we will see the light.