

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Nicodemus: Uplifting”

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John 3:14-17

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In our continuing look at Christ’s exchange with this man Nicodemus, we’ve been exploring some of the points of doubt, the points of question, the points of ongoing steps forward and back in the journey of faith. All those things are raised just in this brief conversation between Jesus and this Pharisee who comes to Jesus by night.

If you’ve been with us these past few weeks, I hope you’ve felt encouraged and affirmed in the questions you may inevitably bring. Maybe you’re here uncertain about faith. Maybe you’re here uncertain about church. Maybe you’re here uncertain about this Jesus, and like Nicodemus, it feels like you come by night, not especially wanting to be noticed while you do so. Those are good things, and we’re glad you’re here.

At some point, though, the conversation turns. It’s not just about questions. It’s about God’s answer to them. It may not be quite what we were expecting, and it may not be something we entirely understand or accept outright. But we hear God’s answer, and we see what God is like. Let’s go to God’s Word together, John 3:14-17.

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.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Loving God, by grace you give yourself for us, and by grace you reveal yourself to us. Make your love and grace known to us anew this day, in ways we’ve never known or felt before. May this Word, which for some may be unfamiliar while for others may be all too familiar, resound in our hearts in a new way. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

There was a Roman goddess named Febris. You may not have heard of her unless you’re really into mythology. Kind of a lesser deity, at least compared to some of the big ones in the Greek/Roman pantheon like Zeus/Jupiter, Athena/Minerva, or Poseidon/Neptune. She was the goddess of fevers. Her name Febris is the reason we call them “fevers” in the first place and have words like “febrile,” referring to fevers. As the name would suggest, she had power over this particular medical ailment, and the power to make them subside.

Also, interestingly, one of her chief attributes was honesty.

So in the ancient Roman world, if one had, or had a loved one, suffering from a fever, Febris is the one you would pray to. And because she was so associated with honesty, you typically didn't pray to her with flattery or offerings or sacrifices, but just straightforward, beseeching her help to release one from a fever.

In Hinduism, the highest principle of reality, not exactly a deity per se, but of divine substance, is something called Brahman. It's in, through, above, below, before, after, and around everything, counterintuitively both unchanging and yet the cause of all change, the reality in which all change takes place, intimately entwined with reality and yet impersonal, that which binds all things together. If you're familiar with Star Wars at all, it's pretty much The Force.

Thus with Brahman being this highest of principles within Hinduism, to seek it doesn't exactly mean trying to gain its favor, since it's impersonal and in everything, but rather to become more aware of it, and thus become more tranquil and at peace within the universe, treating everything, every person, every creature, every plant, every substance with dignity, as all of it is connected in this Brahman, becoming one with everything, so to speak.

Today isn't the day to unpack, critique, and compare different religions. The point is, the way one sees the divine, the way one sees God, or the way one sees the lack of God inevitably shapes your life. If you understood God to be this vengeful, capricious being but susceptible to flattery, then you probably spend your life trying to butter this god up. The question is what do you see? What have you been shown?

This man Nicodemus that night had been shown quite a bit.

There's a reason why one of the verses here, v. 16, is the most well-known verse in the whole Bible. There's a reason Martin Luther referred to it as the "gospel in miniature," and "the heart of the Bible." There's a reason also why he said it was "so pregnant with meaning that it can never be exhausted." It's to the point that even talking about this verse tragically feels trite, or that the numbers 3:16 can become part of a punchline—for those praying to the fantasy football gods this season, you may find yourself reciting McCaffrey 3:16 to yourself.

But the message here, conveyed to this man of questions and doubt, this man who came to Jesus by night, declares the good news of a God who is not limited in scope or power like the minor deities of fevers and festivals, not removed from existence by impersonality, and not to be feared for reckless or unpredictable wrath. The message here declares to this man seeking meaning, seeking hope, seeking definition that God is one who loves and who gives, that we might believe, that we might live.

Jesus invokes an image, a story from the Torah, of Moses lifting up a bronze serpent in the wilderness, a story from the Book of Numbers. Those with good memories will remember back in the Spring Pastor Ben preaching on that very story. The Israelites were plagued by venomous snakes throughout the camp, but the Lord instructed Moses to make a serpent, set it on a pole, so that everyone who looked upon it would live. It's a story of healing, of belief, of God's deliverance from the sickness and evil among us. It's part of the reason many medical organizations have as a symbol a snake wrapped around a pole, by the way.

And then Jesus adds, "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."

It's at this point that we come to the part that folks are typically most familiar with, that verse 16, and for good reason. As we consider this through the eyes of this man Nicodemus, these words, these memorable words

are the way Jesus chooses to relate the good news of God and his love and the giving, the lifting up of his Son to this man, this skeptic, who comes to him by night.

Why would the Son of Man be lifted up like that serpent in the wilderness? “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.” And continuing, “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.”

Here, at this moment of exchange with this man Nicodemus, Jesus is teaching him something he perhaps has been taught, at least in part, something he perhaps would mentally agree with, but perhaps something that hasn't taken hold in his life, because he hadn't seen it, hadn't really seen it. Just like Febris or Brahman or any other perspective on God or lack thereof will inevitably shape one's life, maybe Jesus senses that Nicodemus has lost sight of this all too foundational thing: that God loves him, that God loves the world. And because of that love, God gives, that the world might be healed.

Now the particulars of God's giving, of giving his Son, of his Son being lifted up, those aren't known to Nicodemus nor to Jesus' disciples. How could they be? Jesus is declaring something here about the cross, and his being literally lifted up, and that being this visible, visceral demonstration of the way God loves you.

It can almost feel trite to speak of the love of God. If you've been around church or the Christian faith much in your own life, you've probably already gathered as much: yes, God loves you; yes, God loves the world. But that's one of the declarations that we can hear so many times that we can miss its importance. And it's one of those things that if we lose sight of it, so much else falls out of place.

Or maybe today you're here and, yeah, you've more or less heard the schpeel, yes Jesus loves me, he died on the cross, but you're not so sure you buy it, or you're not so sure that you care.

Or maybe today you hear the message, yes, Jesus loves me, God loves me, God loves the world, but if that's true, then why does his church look so different? Why does his church look so judgmental, so eager to point the finger, so decidedly unloving? And maybe you've felt you've been on the receiving end of that judgment.

Wherever you might be today as we come to this verse, one that maybe you've heard before, that maybe you've heard a lot of times before, may we see it in a new way, in a renewed way. See for yourself.

What is Jesus' saying about God's nature, about his nature, about God's purposes in all this? Is it to bring about judgment? To declare unto the unrighteous, “Feel bad about yourselves!”? To be vengeful upon all the horrid sinners? No.

That's not to say that there is no place for judgment in our understanding of God—next year we're going to talk a bit more about judgment and how we might understand it in a more comprehensive way rather than just being scared of it. There's a place for judgment; it is closely tied to the love of God, setting the world right, but it is ultimately an act of love to make right that which is wrong, out of care for the world.

So see for yourself. Does the world strike you as a place that'd be doing pretty okay for itself? You consider the state of affairs, of war, of pestilence, of hostility. You consider even just the headlines of the past few days, of shootings and violence. See for yourself. Does the world seem like it's okay? Or do you see a place desperately in need of renewal?

Or consider yourself. And I don't mean this as, "Look at yourself you wretched sinner, and feel bad" but an honest look at yourself, as I look at myself. In your heart of hearts, do you honestly believe, "Eh, I'm pretty much the greatest"? No need for regret about one's past. No need for desperation about one's present. No need for anxiety about one's future. See for yourself. Do you see someone who's got it all together, or do you see someone desperately broken in need of healing?

It is to you, it is to me, it is to us that this declaration, this assurance about God and his intentions comes.

God's saying, "I love you, and I gave my Son, so that you might see that there is hope in this broken world, not through might, not through vengeance, but through love."

There is hope that will set things right in a way that runs counter to the ways of the world. There is hope in the place where the judgment of God and the love of God meet, the cross of Jesus, the very lifting up of the Son. It says, "Behold the end result of all our broken ways, our ways of spitefulness, our ways of violence, our ways of turning from the path of God. Look what it brings about. The vengeful execution of an innocent man, the murder of the very one God sent.

And yet behold what this says about God: that here all our broken ways converge, all our cruelty, all our sin, here upon this innocent man, the Son of God. And how are they met? How are they answered? With judgment upon us? No. With grace. With the one who says, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do."

See for yourself. Imagine this man lifted up, in all its grotesquery, but see what it declares: that the Lord is a Lord of love, not of an empty love, but of a sacrificial love, who gives of himself that we might see, that we might believe, that we might be healed.

Because it changes things, doesn't it? If we see it for ourselves, that is. If we truly see and believe that this is who God is, that this is what God does, that he loves, that he gives. What might that change about your heart?

There's a place in western Jordan called Mount Nebo, overlooking the Jordan River and looking westward into the West Bank and Israel. It's the traditional place identified as the deathplace of the prophet Moses. We visited it a year and a half ago while in the Holy Land. Whether it was the actual place, who knows? But there's a lot of power and symbolism to a place like that.

But at the top, right at the lookout over the Jordan and into the Promised Land, so to speak, there's a statue of a pole with a snake wrapped around it, that ancient sign of healing. Now if ever there was a place in the world in need of healing, it is there. But more importantly, high atop this mountain, there for all to see, is this sign of God's healing upon those who see and believe.

As it happens, this statue is in the shape of a cross.

Imagine this same sign, looming high, looming well in view for everyone, this sign of God's great love for you, for the world, this sign that says "I gave my Son, that you might live." This declaration is lifted up for all to see, for you to see.

Friends, in the name of the Lord who loves you, see for yourself.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.