

A Life For Us Salvation

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
John 3:14-21

*“God didn’t send the Son into the world to judge the world,
but that the world might be saved through him.”*
John 3:17 (CEB)¹

Every Lenten journey with Jesus to Jerusalem...Every *consideration* of Jesus’ **life for us** ... should include this story of encounter with a man called Nicodemus. In classic *Johannine* fashion... It depicts *light* and **darkness**. It involves *question*, answer, confusion, and **ultimate truth**. It draws on the *richness* of the Hebrew Scriptures – here the Pentateuch. *And...* It features one of the best-known *verses* in the Bible.

As we consider – last week and this morning – on our Lenten journey with Jesus to the cross in Jerusalem – his life for us...

This is a story that has meaning for us today.

I

We joined the conversation at midstream... A conversation between Nicodemus – an established Jewish leader – a member of the ‘High Council’ – called the Sanhedrin... and Jesus, of course – the Teacher from Nazareth – who was in Jerusalem for the Passover.

Up to this point in the story – set in **the darkness of night** – in which Nicodemus (in his apparent **ignorance** – he was, quite literally, **in the dark**) comes to see **JESUS** – the **Light of the world**... *The two faithful and learned men* have discussed what it means...what it involves – to see the kingdom of God.

They've entered into a rousing discussion over a person needing to be 'born anew' – or 'born from above' – in order to see this kingdom.

Faithful people of God – I find – have been arguing over that same issue of "rebirth" – or being "born again" in Christ – ever since... *Have they not?*

Sometimes we, like Nicodemus, are led to believe that 'being right and acceptable to God the Father' is something *we* have to do and manage for ourselves... And sometimes (we think) even for *other people*.

At times, we (some of us) go so far in our thinking as to believe that *unless* other people see and understand God the way we do...or even to interpret the Scriptures as we see and interpret God's word... then all hope for them is somehow lost. (There's apparently no room for their salvation.)

Sadly, in some cases, we barricade ourselves from association with – so called "non-believers" – in order to guard ourselves from the 'false doctrine' or teachings they profess.

A lesson from this story is that **all of us** – righteous in our believing...and ignorant in our practice of faith – **all of us** need to come to the place where Jesus is... We need to come with the earnest questioning of Nicodemus...*All of us* should seek the knowledge and truth of God – which Christ, the Light – reveals to the world.

II

I mentioned the Hebrew Scriptures alluded to at the beginning of our reading this day. It is from a story of Moses and the Exodus of Israel. You will find the story *tucked-away* in the book of Numbers.²

It's actually a story that – if we're careful – in which we may even see a bit of *ourselves*. Basically, the Israelites – crossing the Sinai Wilderness from their captivity in Egypt...now heading to their promised freedom in the land of Canaan – are complaining – *again!*

They're *complaining* about the food.

They're *moaning* about the lack of water.

They're *grumbling* about the current 'Administration'.

They're *impatient* about the **lack of progress** being made...for their benefit.

In other words, *once again* they are grumbling against God!

And – *to his credit* – God has had just about enough of their grumbling...and decides to teach them a lesson.

He calls out the venomous snakes!

This *is* a wilderness, remember! And when the slithering serpents start biting the people... well the **grumblers** begin to die.

'**Serves them right,**' we may say... But – providentially - the Children of Israel begin to see *the error of their ways*... They confess their sins... *And* they ask Moses...to ask God ...to "call off the snakes!" Which Moses does.

But God does an interesting thing. *Rather* than remove the serpents from the Israelite encampment...God gives them an 'object lesson.' He tells Moses to make a fiery serpent and put it on a pole...Then, **lift it up high**... Instructing the people to take a good, hard look at the serpent. And, in doing so...they shall live... Even when they are bitten – they shall live.

Moses, of course, does this... Except he makes a **serpent of bronze** – (also known as a saraph). *Lifting it up high*, it has the same effect...The people would look at the bronze serpent – raised on high in the midst of their troubled lives. **They would believe** what God had promised Moses...and they would **live**.

The bronze or 'fiery serpent' became a symbol of salvation.

Jesus referred to that ancient story with Nicodemus – a man who knew it well – and provided an object lesson of his own...

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One (the Son of Man) be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.”³

Of course, Jesus is foretelling how – in the future – on *another* Feast of the Passover – **he**, the Son of Man, **would be the one who is lifted up...** **Not** as a serpent that causes pain and death ... But as the One – the instrument of salvation – that the people...in the midst of their pain...their sorrow...their prospect of death...could look to as God’s enduring promise of life in the midst of death. **Salvation – His life for us.**

III

So what do we believe about salvation? *Simply this...* It’s not about what **you** do. **Salvation** – that is...being saved...or rescued...or delivered...from *ourselves*...and from the pang of evil in this world – is not something **you** can achieve... Certainly not something *you* attain on your own.

No...salvation – for you...your loved ones...your acquaintances...even your enemy ... salvation for all the world...*comes to you* – and **to all** in the person of Jesus Christ. Here’s that verse which is so well-known...

“For God so loved the world...”⁴

God so loved you.

Commenting on this text, John Calvin reminds us...

We ought not...to look at anything else in Christ, than that God, out of his boundless goodness, chose to extend his aid for saving us who are lost....

God is unwilling that we should be overwhelmed with everlasting destruction, because he has appointed his Son to be the salvation of the *world*.⁵

A friend of mine was once giving a children’s message... I believe it was during the season of Lent. *He invited the children* to walk with him up to the

chancel... There was a large brass cross standing on the table. He picked up the cross and held it for them... He was planning to give them an object lesson.

Holding the cross, my friend said... "*What do you see here?*" Of course he was expecting the children to say... "A cross." And he would proceed from there. But – as is sometimes the case with 'children's sermons' – he was in for a surprise. The answer from one child completely surprised him.

When he held up the shiny cross – which reflected the faces of the children – and asked, "What do you see?"... One little girl said,

"I see myself in the cross."

This was a congregation that was used to laughter...especially during 'Moments with the children'. But *this day was different*... my friend told me. The congregation, he said, was silent... Not a word... Not a chuckle...just **silent**.

People pondered what she had just said... "I see myself."

No truer word of grace could be spoken.

In the cross, *we see ourselves*.⁶

Jesus said to Nicodemus... a man who would *one day* stand at the foot of the cross... taking down the broken body of Jesus to be buried...⁷

"Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God."⁸

Salvation – A life for us!

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Endnotes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the Scripture quotations cited herein are from the **Common English Bible** – (CEB) - *a fresh translation to touch the heart and mind*, copyright © 2011 by Common English Bible, Nashville. All rights reserved.

² See Number 21:4-9.

³ John 3:14, **Common English Bible** (Nashville: Common English Bible, 2011), p. 97.

⁴ John 3:16a.

⁵ John Calvin, **Commentary on the Gospel according to John**, Vol. I, tr. William Pringle, *Calvin's Commentaries*, XVII (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 126.

⁶ A story told to me by the Rev. Dr. Neil M. Stevenson, Pastor, Williamsburg (Va) Presbyterian Church, 1985-1995.

⁷ See John 19:38-42.

⁸ John 3:21.