

This is the Only Way

John 3:1–17

Dear friends in Christ

Our service today asks, “What kind of Love is this?” As we are aided in our contemplation of everything God has done for us, especially in the fact that we have been given a new life through baptism.

Indeed “This miracle of life reborn Comes from the Lord of breath; The perfect Man from life was torn; Our life comes through Christ’s death. (LSB 591:2)

But why would this be like that? In the words of the Gospel reading for this morning that God so loved the world, makes us to ask “what kind of love is this” that Jesus sacrificed himself for us?

Yet what we hear in the Gospel lessons, is indeed the heart of the Gospel, the Good News. It is, in many respects, the simplest and clearest expression of who Jesus is and what he came to earth to do. Quite simply, it is out of God’s love that Jesus came to save the world. And make us his children. Save the world from what? Save the world from itself, from Satan, and, most obviously, he came to save the world from death.

But here’s the problem, and it is one which Christianity has sought to answer since Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. If Jesus conquered death by his death on the cross, why, then, do we have difficult times on this earth? Even death?

In order to answer that question, we have to turn to the Book of Numbers and look at the Old Testament people of Israel for an example and explanation. As you see the children of Israel in Numbers chapter 21 are wandering in the desert. They are partway through forty years of wandering, where God teaches them how to listen to his Word and to trust that he will provide for all their needs, both physical and spiritual. But the children of Israel are slow to learn, and above all, they are rebellious. They are so rebellious, in fact, that God sends serpents to go and bite them. Many of them died. The wages of sin is death, Paul reminds us in the New Testament. Then we read the following: “And the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have

spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people" (Num 21:7).

Moses agreed, because he recognized their repentance, and that they knew their sin and need for redemption. So Moses prayed to God and God answered him by giving Moses instructions on how to save the people. The Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live" (21:8). So Moses does this. And you have to admit, this is rather . . . strange. Put a snake on a stick? Maybe the Israelites were familiar with that as the Egyptians already were using the figure of snake as a symbol of healing, or most properly as we hear in God's word, the snake represents the form that Satan took in the Garden of Eden.

So, two things really stand out in the episode from the people of Israel. First is that the form of their salvation and life isn't much to look at. A bronze serpent, not exactly something to give one a lot of hope. That point we can see. The second point is a little less obvious. The snakes still come. Nowhere in the text do we read that Moses led the snakes away from the people. God didn't take away the serpents, but he gave the people a way out, a way of salvation, so that even though they were bitten, the bite did not kill them. Whoever looked upon the bronze serpent in faith, that person lived.

Sure, but what does that have to do with us today? Is there any correlation? As we see, God uses the very image of evil -the serpent, as the means to bring about salvation. The people of Israel had to look in faith upon the bronze serpent on the pole. If they did this, they lived. If not, they died. In the same way, Jesus says, the Son of Man *must* be lifted up on the cross, the cross which was a symbol of evil back in the day, has become now the symbol of our salvation.

Now fast-forward to Jesus speaking with Nicodemus in John's Gospel. He was a religious leader who at some level, recognizes Jesus as an authority from God. Why? Because of the miracles, which in John's Gospel are called *signs*. Nicodemus does not confess that Jesus is the Word made flesh here (1:14), but rather that God is *with him*. And out of his knowledge he dialogs with Jesus.

Jesus then uses what happened to the Israelites in the desert with the snakes, to show Nicodemus how God works. God works in the world like this. He doesn't take

death away. Not yet, at least. What he does is send his Son into a world of death, so that he dies in our place. As we hear in verse 16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” To whom did he hand Jesus over? He handed Jesus over to sin, death, and Satan himself, the unholy trinity that makes up the evil we all live with every day.

Yes we all, Jesus dies on the cross for all, including you and me. Jesus takes the punishment that you and I deserve, and gives us eternal life and sets you up as kings and queens in his eternal kingdom. All because God the Father hands him over to death. This is how God so loved the world! What kind of love is this? It is the kind that saves us! This is God’s way, his only way out, out of death and eternal condemnation.

So, for you and I here and now, today, we will still suffer death and the effects of sin. We get sick and injured. Things don’t work as they ought to work. The serpent still bites at your heels. But Jesus Christ has crushed the head of that old evil foe. By his death, he has destroyed death, so that what we endure and suffer now is mere the aftereffects, rumblings and grumbings from a foe that has already lost but wants to drag as many down with him as he can.

Make no mistake, and trust this truth, that because you are baptized, you are Christ’s, and Satan cannot harm you. Jesus does not condemn us because of our sins and failures. He doesn’t come to shake his head and urge you to do better next time. He doesn’t come to give you an example to shoot for, or a target to reach. His goals are much, much higher. Remember again verse 17 from chapter 3: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” That love though will transform us, makes new people, people that reflect the Kingdom of God, equipping us for good works, and we gladly respond because of his great love for us.

That’s God’s plan for you and for the entire world. He wants to save you, to heal you, to comfort you, to love you, and to give you hope that no matter how much the snake bites, you may lift up your eyes and heart to the cross of Jesus Christ, and in that cross, a symbol of shame as much as any serpent, in that cross you will find life—real, abundant life that has no end, because he has no end.

Whoever believes in him, whoever believes in Jesus, may have life into eternity. This is not simply biological life, but the life that can only come from God himself. And that life already begins as we are baptized. Jesus tells Nicodemus that "...unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." In other words no one who remains in the old birth, in the flesh, would see the kingdom of heaven, since heaven is closed to all mankind. If they are to enter heaven, they must be born anew not by the flesh but by water and by the Holy Spirit. There is no other way, no other route leading to heaven than that of water and the Holy Spirit. We must be born again through these. And in that new birth, the Spirit leads and governs us. Jesus says, the new man, the new person who is born again, is recognized in the same way the wind is recognized, "namely," Luther says "by the sound: when he speaks and treats of the divine Word, of Baptism, of the Supper of Christ's body and blood, of absolution...—which are visible things and signs. This is all we hear. We hear the sound, but we do not know whence it comes."

So how do we treat the visible signs? We behold them as life giving signs, by which the holy Spirit works in us. Especially at the face of the snake, satan, who chases after us. We hear God's word, we listen to the message that he who believes and is baptized will be saved (Mark 16:16). We listen to the Holy Spirit, through the Word, that reproves us because of sin (John 16:8–9), but so wonderfully leads us to the Comfort of God's forgiveness. When we receive the absolution from the voice of the pastor, and are comforted by it, what we really hear is the voice of the Holy Spirit, His blowing and whistling. And it is all for you, out of God's love, this is his plan, there is not other way.

Sometimes we find that truth difficult, our human reason, like Nicodemus' says we must do something to please God and gain salvation. Our reason and nature are incapable of comprehending the extent of God's love in Christ. But all we need do, is to trust the work of the Holy Spirit, for it is his work to bring us to have faith in that great love, to trust it, and to be kept in it. And for that he comes through hearing God's Word and receiving his gifts of grace.

Therefore, this morning, come, each one of us, children of God, inheritors of his love, and receive the gifts of the kingdom of heaven prepared for you before the

foundation of the world. Come and rejoice in his body and blood, and give thanks for all his benefits, for the mercy of God endures forever.

What kind of Love is this? It is the kind that saves, it is the way God saves the world. It is God's love for you!

In Jesus, amen!