

"God So Loved"
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – March 14, 2021

Please Read:
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

In his book *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller recounts a conversation with his friend Tony. “You know what really helped me understand why I believe in Jesus, Tony?”

“What’s that?”

“Penguins.”

“Penguins?” Tony asked.

“Penguins,” Donald said. Then he goes on to describe the life cycle of penguins to his friend. The females lay their eggs, and then turn them over to the males. The females leave, traveling for days back to the ocean, where they go fishing. All the males are left in an enormous circle, tending to the eggs. They huddle together for warmth, and kind of rotate the circle so none of them are on the outside all of the time. The males are sitting on the eggs for a month when the females make their way back. And right when they do, almost to the day, the eggs hatch.

Tony’s not so sure he sees the analogy, so Donald explains himself. The penguins “have this radar inside them that told them when and where to go and none of it made any sense, but they show up on the very day their babies are being born, and the radar always turns out to be right... I have a radar inside me that says to believe in Jesus. Somehow, penguin radar leads them perfectly well. Maybe it isn’t so foolish that I follow the radar that is inside of me.”¹

It's bizarre to think of penguins having anything to do with faith, but Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it this way in a poem called *God's Grandeur*: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.” The old priest in *The diary of a Country Priest* by George Bernanos, said it this way: "Grace is everywhere." God’s glorious grace is everywhere, even in penguins and even in snakes!

Snakes, light and darkness, judgment, and salvation. There's a lot going on in our gospel text today... but then, there's a lot going on in our lives. And we need to hear again the good news that as Jesus is lifted up, there's something deep in us that recognizes his beauty, his glorious goodness, truth, and love. And that somehow, we are drawn to him.

Today's text is such a famous text, it merits a different approach. Luther called John 3:16 "the gospel in a nutshell." I'm guessing that most of you who grew up in the church know it well, and may even have it memorized... But that's the problem. We think we know this. It's not as shocking and surprising as when Jesus first said it.

The context is Jesus talking with Nicodemus, a man who was searching for God. Nicodemus was a religious man. You must immediately recognize the problem here that religious people don’t necessarily know God or have much of a spiritual life. It’s a fact that most of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day either hated him or found him subversive. Jesus did not fit any of their stereotypes about who the Messiah should be, but Nicodemus had this internal radar that pointed him to Jesus. He sensed that Jesus was the source of life, but he wonders for us, "How can these things be?"

¹ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 55-56.

Our text today begins with the strange language of Moses lifting up a serpent in the wilderness, and that in the same way, Jesus says he must be lifted up.

Any Jew would know what Jesus is talking about here. Back in Numbers, chapter 21, you can read about it. The people of Israel were complaining about how God led them away from their slavery in Egypt only to die in the wilderness. The people had a lack of faith in God's promises to them, and God sent judgment in the form of poisonous snakes that bit the people, and some died. The people understandably change their thinking and come to Moses for help. Moses prays to God. God tells Moses to cure the people by raising before them a *nahash n'hoshet* for them to stare at. What does this Hebrew phrase mean? The Hebrew means literally a brass or copper serpent. But if we listen to the sound of the words, we might hear "a copper copperhead," "a serpenty serpent," a "super-serpent." What cures us from serpents? The cure is a serpent that we call forth for ourselves, even more deeply "serpenty" in its essence than the deadly living snakes.²

When the sick Israelites looked at the bronze serpent, they lived! You see, the antidote for the serpent is a serpent lifted up. I'm sure Sherm or most medical doctors would recognize this as sounding very much like how a vaccine works. One way to do it is to take some of the illness and introduce it to the body so that the immune system recognizes it and is strengthened to overcome it.

The way to life, the cure for sin is the one who knew no sin becoming sin, taking upon himself the sins of the world. Jesus, of course, was talking about how he would be lifted up on the cross, about how he would embody all of the worst poison of humanity; the sins of our reckless rebellion; the sins of our religious righteousness.

"How can these things be?" Jesus says, "Everyone who believes in him [the Son of Man] may have eternal life." This is an important core teaching of the good news. *Everyone* does not mean a certain insider group of Christians that have a glossy spin on the truth; *Everyone* does not mean the Roman Catholics or the Protestants or the Orthodox or the Pentecostals; *Everyone* does not mean the rich or the poor, the intelligent or the foolish, the educated or the ignorant, the blacks or the whites, the powerful or the powerless.... *Everyone* means *Everyone* ... *Everyone* who goes to church on Sunday? *Everyone* who memorizes the ten commandments? *Everyone* who sings in the choir or serves on a committee? *Everyone* who comes to church regularly? No... Jesus said, "*Everyone who believes in me may have eternal life.*"

How many of you think of eternal life as something chronologically distant and far off in the future? Interestingly, Jesus defines eternal life later in chapter 17 of the gospel according to John in this way: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent..." (17.3). Do you see? *Eternal life according to Jesus has less to do with a future reality as it does with a immediate relationship!* Eternal life has everything to do with the quality of your communion – your being in community with the living God through faith in Jesus here and now!

² Rabbi Arthur Waskow and Rabbi Phyllis Berman, *Red Cow, Red Blood, Red Dye: Staring Death & Life in the Face*.

This is the claim being made in the equally famous Ephesian's text. "*We are saved by grace through faith...*" The sole basis for entrance into the family of faith is grace. It's not about whether you have it all together finally (good luck with that!) or whether you've figured out the Trinity or tithe on all of your income before taxes. No, the sole basis for membership in the church is the simple statement that you have put your trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This is a gift. There's nothing you can do to earn it. Somehow Jesus has been lifted up so that the radar in your heart and mind has drawn you to him. You know, however crazy it may sound, that the good news of the gospel is true for you!

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, is called "mid-Lent," or as it was once known, "Refreshment Sunday." Traditionally, this Sunday was a respite from the rigors of penitence and Lenten self-denial. Since the Middle Ages, this Sunday has been a time for modest feasting and refreshment, a break in the severe Lenten fast. In the relatively gloomy way toward the Passion of Christ, the gospel for this Sunday is John 3. It serves as a pause in the penitential procession so that we might put the cross in proper context. This is helpful in liberating Lent.

It is liberating to hear and believe that "God *so loved* the world that *God gave* his only begotten Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but may have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, *not to condemn* the world, but that the world might *be saved* through him." God so loved the world, loved so much that God gave. Not to condemn but to save, Jesus says. *Not to condemn.*

In the midst of our trivial moralizing, our parental scolding, gratuitousness, and scramble for a few brownie points, Jesus reminds us of why we're here. We are on the way, not because of what *we* have done, or left undone, but because of what *God* has done. The cross is not simply one more piece of damaging evidence against guilty humanity, as if we needed more evidence of our sin - the weekly news is enough to damn us all.

No. The cross says that the goriest work of human sin gets transformed into glorious divine redemption. We do not look at the cross to see what we did to Jesus. We look at the cross, John 3 says, to see what God has done for us!

That's the surprising Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's the Good News of what God has done for us that we could not do for ourselves. It was out of love that Christ came among us, and stood beside us, and died with us, for us, and saved us. Love is the main thing with our Lord...

"Oh yes," says the church at mid-Lent. "Now we remember..." It was for this that we began the Lenten Journey. It was not for sackcloth and ashes, whips, the sacrifice of an after-dinner cognac or a chocolate that we are here. It was love that put us in this parade. We bow not as miserable worms, but as those humbled by the sheer wonder of the gift. It was not to condemn us that our Lord bid us bear his cross, but to save us. We are here not as the lost, but as the found.

Jesus calls you, friend, not to condemn, but to save. It was not for condemnation that he was sent to you, but for love.

As Kierkegaard once said, "God creates out of nothing. Wonderful, you say. Yes, to be sure, but he does what is still more wonderful: God makes saints out of sinners." Even you are to be included in God's heavenly kingdom, the communion of saints from around the world and from ages past, present, until the end of time.

God is at work in each of us here and our internal radar. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee..." Blaise Pascal said that we are all created with a God-shaped hole in our hearts... Like Nicodemus, are you searching? Like penguins, is something drawing you beyond yourself?

Penguins and Serpents. Judgment and grace. Good works. It's all part of the strange radar that draws us to new life. May you trust in the mystery of it all, and believe who Jesus is, and what he has done for you. Even in the desert places of our Lenten wonderings, even in the poisonous places of life in this world, may you lift up the One who brings God's glorious new life for all...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.