

Sermon Draft

Text: John 3:1–17

Sermon: “The Way”

Even though Jesus has died on the cross and risen again from the dead, we still suffer the earthly effects of sin. We hurt, and we’ll still die, unless Jesus returns first. But God is still loving us, John 3:16. Perhaps we should think of those lingering hurts as a wound that’s in the process of healing. The doctor has done the surgery. The cancer is gone. But the wounds will take time to heal. We still live with the memories of the hurt. But at the Last Day, even the scars will be healed, even the painful memories will no longer hurt like they once did. I am really looking forward to that!

The Gospel in a nutshell. That’s what we know this verse from John’s Gospel as. It is, in many respects, the simplest and clearest expression of who Jesus is and what he came to earth to do. Quite simply, Jesus came to save the world. 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 still die?

In order to answer that question, we have to turn to the Book of Numbers and look at the Old Testament people of Israel. 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 trust that he will provide for all their needs, both physical and spiritual. But the children of Israel are, well, they are dense, 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, as Paul reminds us.

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”*** (Numbers 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 must admit, this is rather . . . odd. Put a snake on a stick? Isn’t that snake the form that Satan took in the Garden of Eden? Yes, it is. And that is exactly the point.

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 get Moses leading the snakes away like the Pied Piper, sending them into the river to drown. God didn’t take away the serpents. 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.

Now fast-forward to Jesus speaking with Nicodemus in John's Gospel. Jesus uses this event in the life of Israel 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 loved the world in this way, that he handed over his only-begotten Son. 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. This is the way God loved the world.

Jesus then takes the punishment that we deserve and gives us eternal life, setting us up as kings and queens in his eternal kingdom. All because God the Father hands him over to death.

So, for us here and now and today, beloved, we 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 our 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 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 though we are Christ's, and Satan cannot harm us. Jesus does not come into the world to "tsk, tsk, tsk" at our sins and failures. He doesn't come to shake his head and urge us to do better next time. He doesn't come to give us 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 is God's plan for you, me, and for the entire world. He wants to save us, to heal us, to comfort us, to love us, and to give us hope that no matter how much the snake bites, we may lift up our eyes and hearts to the cross of Jesus Christ, and in that cross, a symbol of shame as much as any serpent, in that cross we will find life real, abundant life that has no end, because he has no end.

So come, blessed of God, 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.

Amen