

To look to the cross
John 3:14-21, Lent 4, Year B
18 March 2012
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

At the outset this morning, I want to point you to the way in which our lectionary works, because today it works exceptionally well. The lectionary is the arrangement by which we juxtapose our scripture readings for the day. It's not haphazard. Sometimes the Old Testament readings are linear, and seek to tell us, over time, the remarkable story of Israel. Other times, the Old Testament readings are placed alongside particular passages from the Gospels because they amplify the Gospel's meaning or anticipate the truth the Gospel will reveal. Often we miss the significance of the connection, but today that's virtually impossible. Our Old Testament reading from Numbers could almost be the prologue to our Gospel passage from John. Numbers ends, "So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live."

Then John begins, "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."

See how that works? Through God's grace, an event from Moses' era sheds light on the central Christian event over one thousand years later.

More about that in a moment. But first, an acknowledgement that in today's Gospel we read what has been called the most famous verse in the Bible.¹ When I was a kid, I watched Monday Night Football every week with my dad, and as the ABC camera would pan the crowd, invariably it would pause on the guy in the rainbow wig, who held up a sign that read, "John 3:16."

That verse says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

Preachers, pundits, and the man on the street corner love this verse. It says so very much, and yet it is so very open to interpretation. What does it mean to perish? What is eternal life? In a word, what is *salvation*? To get at such a question, we need to put this singular verse back in its context. We need, in other words, to pay attention to the lectionary.

In our Old Testament reading from Numbers, in the wilderness the Israelites are falling apart. Things went well for a while. In fact, just before today's reading the Israelites have defeated one of their most vicious enemies. But today, they've already forgotten such favor. The Israelites complain that life is too hard, too boring, too empty. They are having, we might say today, an existential crisis: What's it all for? What's the point?

The Book of Numbers says that, in consequence, poisonous snakes show up and bite the Israelites, and the people start dropping like flies. That seems a strange twist in this story! But the Great Church Father St. Gregory of Nyssa says we make a mistake if we think these are literal snakes. Instead, he says, the snakes are “the gnawings of desire.”ⁱⁱ They represent all those things to which we turn when life gets too hard, too boring, too empty. They are the destructive things to which we give our attention when we turn our attention away from God. They are the things you did yesterday, or I did last week, that made us feel like we lessened ourselves and diminished the image of God in us. *These* are the serpents that bite the Israelites, that bite *us*. Their venom may be slow, but it kills. It destroys lives.

Moses is alarmed by what is happening to his people, and he begs God to save them. And in response, God has Moses create a bronze snake coiled around a staff. Moses holds up that snake before the people, and those whose attention it draws find that they are saved from the serpents’ poison.

And then we turn to the Gospel passage. It important to know that Jesus’ conversation partner today is Nicodemus, who has come to visit Jesus under cover of darkness. Nicodemus does not want to be seen or, indeed, to see very much himself. He’d rather stare in the darkness at the ground (where the serpents slither). He prefers to consult with Jesus sideways and then slink back into the shadows unchanged. And it is here that Jesus recalls that story from Numbers. It is here that Jesus says, “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.”

In other words, whatever John 3:16 means, whatever salvation means—which is what we’re trying to figure out here—is directly connected to that serpent on the staff.

Let me shift gears here for a minute. The Rector’s Book Club is currently reading David Brooks’ remarkable book *The Social Animal*. The book charts the development of a person from the womb until death. The chapter about the newborn child talks about the ways in which babies mimic the expressions of their parents, as early as the day of the baby’s birth. Babies furrow their brows and stick out their tongues when their mothers do the same, even before the baby is conscious that his brow and tongue exist.

It turns out the baby is doing more than mimicking. Scientists now theorize that the human brain includes “mirror neurons” whose task it is automatically to re-create the mental patterns of those around us. Babies organize their internal states by seeing their own minds reflected back at them in the faces of others. Literally, the baby’s brain is being built by the mother’s brain. His mind is intertwined with her mind.ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, from our first days, deep in our brains, in the very structure of who we are, we are formed as people by the face in front of us, by the interactions of our days, by the people to whom we, from our earliest moments, give our attention. Mental interaction, it turns out, isn't merely important to development. Quite literally, it shapes us—for good or ill—into being who we are. I find that fascinating.

And so, we can see what John 3:16 means. Let the street preachers claim it is a punched ticket to heaven, which indeed, it is. But it is infinitely more than that. Jesus the Christ, lifted up on the cross, is the serpent on the staff. He seeks to draw our gaze upward from the dark slithering things that infect our lives, to draw our gaze upward into his light. He seeks for us to look upon his life of healing and self-giving, his willingness to sacrifice all for us, and his defeat of darkness and death. And through that steady gaze to have our spirits intertwine with his Spirit.

This is not mere distraction from the darker parts of us. Instead, it melds our souls to Christ's, as the newborn's mind is melded that of her mother. When we gaze upon Jesus, when we reorient our attention to him—which is what believing in him means—we find ourselves formed into new beings. The synapses of our souls are rewired. The fever and power of the serpents' venom is diminished. Our spirits are rebuilt by his Spirit. Quite literally, we are shaped into the beings God created us to be.

This can't happen in an instant, nor casually. With friends, with the support of the church, with our presence here and our prayer out in the world, our gaze must be toward the light. The eyes of our spirits must look steadily upon the heart of God—which is Jesus—so that we begin to laugh, and smile, and find our joy in the life of the One who made us, saves us, and draws us to himself. *Amen.*

ⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_3:16

ⁱⁱ Gregory of Nyssa. *Life of Moses*, ch. 275-277.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brooks, David. *The Social Animal*, 37.