

John 3:14-21
Numbers 21:4-9

3/11/18—Lent 4B

Psalms 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10

Out of Death, Life

One year, for the season of Lent, a church member gave up complaining. Now I'm not mentioning any names. I'm not even saying what church this person belongs to. Or whether this person is male or female. But to tell you the truth, my hat was off to this person.

Because there's something very satisfying about complaining. We complain to our spouses. We complain to our family members. We complain to our friends. We complain to our neighbors. Sometimes we even complain to God.

Just like the Israelites did. It's been said that *we have met the Israelites and they are us*. In the wilderness, those Israelites have been complaining to God for the better part of forty years. *Why'd you take us out of Egypt? At least there we got decent food. We've had it up to here with this manna. Why'd you bring us out to this desert where there's no water?*

Hmmm. I wonder. Do you think God gets tired of our complaining? Do you think hearing our complaints makes God angry? The author of the book of Numbers apparently thought so.

Because according to him, God reacts to the complaints of Israel by sending venomous snakes among them. The people themselves get the guilts and understand the snakes as a punishment for their sin of complaining. Yikes! What if snakes showed up at [Monticello] [Bethel]? Would we believe they were sent by God?

But regardless of where those Old Testament snakes came from, there they were in the middle of the wilderness. Which is a natural habitat of snakes. And it's a place of death—for God's people are being bitten and killed. Moses sees, and Moses prays. And his prayer is answered.

God says: *Moses! Run over to the tent of meeting and grab one of those consecrated bronze vessels used in worship and hammer it out into the form of a serpent. Fasten that bronze serpent onto your staff and lift it up. Then walk through the camp holding it up high. And tell everyone who's been snake-bit to look at it. I promise you, they will not die, but live.*

Out of the midst of death, God provides a way to live. Out of the midst of death, God offers a means to life.

And that's what Jesus wants us to understand. Today's reading from John's Gospel is part of a longer account of Jesus' conversation with a religious leader by the name of Nicodemus.

Now Nicodemus—a Pharisee—doesn't want it to get out that he's meeting with Jesus, so he comes in the middle of the night. And during their time together, Jesus recalls this story from Israel's past. Uses this story to illustrate what he's telling Nicodemus. Uses this story to connect what has been with what will be. Retells this story to show how God has worked and is working and will continue to work in the lives of human creatures.

Remember, Nicodemus—Jesus teaches—how in the scriptures of our people, Moses lifted up a bronze serpent in the wilderness, and everyone who saw it—even though they were dying—lived? Out of the midst of death, God brings life. It's the same way with me, says Jesus. I have to be lifted up so that when dying people see me—really see me, with eyes of faith—they will live.

And Jesus is still speaking to Nicodemus—but not only to Nicodemus!—when in his next breath he says the words we've come to know as John three sixteen.

John three sixteen. Is there any more familiar and beloved verse in the Bible? It's been called the gospel in miniature. We see it on coffee mugs. T-shirts. Bumper-stickers. Billboards. At sporting events, we've seen the Gospel name and the chapter and

verse numbers emblazoned on signs and banners draped across the seats. And even on cars at the racetrack.

But when we rēad a passage that includes John three sixteen, as we do this Sunday, we need to take care not to focus so exclusively on this one verse that we miss what the Holy Spirit is saying to us in the text as a whole. And today, that message has to do with life and death.

God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish...

Hear that *may not perish*? Jesus is speaking of death here. His words suggest that—for those who don't believe—death is a sure and certain outcome. And these words of his lead into what comes next. Jesus goes on to talk about darkness. And evil deeds. And sin.

Now you and I are citizens of the twenty-first century. In our day and time, a lot of people don't like to hear or to talk about sin. Or about death. Maybe that's one reason why our churches aren't as full as they were just a couple of generations ago. Because in God's holy word, we rēad about sin and death. Ephesians reminds us that through trespasses, we human beings were dead. In sin, we humans were dead. Sin is the cause. Death is the effect.

But God gave God's Son precisely so we would *not* die. God could have condemned humanity. Humanity deserves it, for sure. Would anybody have blamed God if God had condemned us? But when God sent God's Son, God did *not* send him to condemn the world. We have this on good authority. The best authority. The authority of Jesus himself.

The One who does not condemn, but offers the grace of forgiveness and redemption. Grace that's offered to *all*. To every person. Each of us gets to make the choice—to respond in faith. To believe. But some choose to not respond. Some choose to not believe. And in making such a choice, they turn their backs on the abundant life that could be theirs. Tragically, they condemn themselves.

For our God is not in the business of condemning. Our God is in the business of saving. And that is good news indeed, because we humans were and are in desperate *need* of saving. We humans were and are in desperate need of a Savior. God sent God's Son *in order that the world might be saved through him*.

Saved! John three sixteen has often been interpreted as a formula for someday-salvation. John three sixteen has often been taken to mean: Believe this set of doctrines now, and you'll get

credit for it later on. You'll get to go to heaven. In the sweet by-and-by. Right now, you just have to believe. During this life, there's not much point in hoping things will get better. Your reward will come later. That's how John three sixteen has sometimes been construed.

But the original Greek of the Gospel gives us a clearer understanding of the actual meaning of Jesus' words than we get from our English-language versions of the Bible. We're used to reading the verse this way: *everyone who believes in him may have eternal life*. But the little Greek word that usually gets translated as *in* actually means *into*. *Everyone who believes into him may have eternal life*.

My sisters and brothers, believing *into* Christ is life, eternal life that begins not someday, but now! Believing *into* Christ is so much more than buying into impersonal, abstract tenets. Believing into Christ is entering into life with him, walking with him, committing yourself to him, giving him your whole allegiance and your fidelity and your heart, being in intimate relationship with him, loving him. Believing into Christ is not just knowing *about* him, but knowing him. Knowing this One who is the perfect likeness of God.

This God, the God we know through Jesus, brings life. Today, out of places of death, God is able to bring life. Out of the deathliness of materialism, God is able to bring life. Out of the deathliness of idolatry, God is able to bring life. Out of the deathliness of exploitation and oppression, God is able to bring life. Out of the deathliness of self-centeredness, God is able to bring life. Out of all the places where human sin leads to darkness and death, God brings light and life.

And love. Our God loves the world with a measureless love. We know this to be true because God has given God's own Son as a gift of love. We believe God's great love to be filled with purpose: to rescue, to deliver, to give life. We experience God's overflowing love as grace—grace that saves through faith in the One who was lifted up on a cross of death. Which God has transformed into a cross of life. For out of death, God brings resurrection. Out of every place of death, God brings the fullness of everlasting life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.