

Lent 4, March 15, 2015. John 3: 14-21 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

In 1977 I was a freshly minted World Council of Churches scholar at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley CA. The WCC told me quite literally to “do what I wanted” – take any class that interested me, immerse myself, learn, build relationships, and not to worry about silly things like grades! Not knowing the way the educational system worked here I took a bunch of 600-level courses – they’re doctoral courses, so I was, back then, getting a little ahead of myself! They were great. I remember one in particular of Freud and Jung that’s stood me in good stead right up to today. One of the books - a real ‘cross-over’ book between personality studies and religion - was “The Three Christs of Ypsilanti” (1964). It was a psychiatric case study three paranoid schizophrenic patients at Ypsilanti State Hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The three men at the center of the book - Clyde, Joe, and Leon - each believed that they were Jesus Christ. What the study showed is that no matter what sort of treatment regime was used with them, one got worse, one stayed the same, and one got better. Why the third man – Leon – got better is at the heart of today’s Old Testament reading and gospel passage.

Lest you go off on the wrong track, however, let me say up front that it’s not about the most famous verse in those readings, John 3:16: “for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

It’s a great quote! It’s the simplest expression of the Heart of Christianity that I can think of, that the loving embrace of God in the gift of Jesus is – if we welcome it – the difference for us between life and death.

The problem is that we can focus only on that oh!-so-famous quote, lift it out of its context, and miss its true significance. The clue that we make that mistake is in the fact that when you here that quote it’s severed from the first word of the verse – “for” – meaning that you’ve turned a conditional phrase into a stand-alone sentence. The meaning is dependent on what preceded it.

If I ignore the “for” in verse 16 then what I’ve done is reduce what it means for me to live a life of faith in the ‘here and now’ to a slogan all about ensuring my personal salvation for life “there and then;” in a sense, my faith becomes all about buying fire insurance!

Now don’t get me wrong! The Christian vision of life after life, of life with the God of the now *and* the beyond, is a beautiful thing! At the very least it’s a faithful way – and it’s my way – of understanding the resurrection of Jesus as “more than just a personal matter for [Jesus], but as a hope that affects us all.” (Pastor D. Mark Davis). It’s a personal and a beautiful thing. But it’s not the only thing.

What’s in this gospel passage that we miss – I suspect with some unconscious intention – is that this passage offers us an insight into the structure of repentance and forgiveness. That appears immediately, with the reference to the Old Testament reading, about the serpent – the snake – raised up in the wilderness.

When you think “serpent” in the Numbers story, think “metaphor.” The narrator identifies

something ('snakes,' he says) that's plaguing the Chosen People, and tells us that the plague is as a result of the failures of the people – their lack of gratitude, their incessant complaining, their pride and arrogance – in the end, for the worst traits that they – and we – share as human beings.

It was only when the people 'came to their senses' – in religious language, 'repented' – asked for forgiveness – that they were even capable of being forgiven. How, after all, can you be forgiven if you aren't aware you've fallen short? That's certainly something I'm very aware of.

Look how Numbers describes how the Chosen People are saved: when they're "bitten by a snake" – in other words, when they fail and fall – it's only when they look into the bronze image of the snake – it's only when they look honestly at their failure – that they're saved. To put it another way, salvation comes not as some sort of omnibus cure for spiritual ills, but as a way of reckoning with the structural evil of rejecting God's gift of life in all its fullness.

That's why John refers to this Numbers story, saying: **"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."**

The cross is an evil thing. It's not merely a device for elevating something so that all can gather around and see, the way Moses' bronze serpent-staff was. The cross is an instrument for inflicting torture, in order to achieve compliance through violence.

By connecting the two John is giving us a way of understanding the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus – as the 'bronze serpent' – is a reminder to us of our own failings and a symbol of them – his crucifixion is the result of, and reminder of, the sorts of things we do to one another, the way we crucify even the ones we love – a reminder to me of the way I crucify the ones I love – the way we crucify the world we live in. The meaning of the cross is, in part, the meaning of sin; the sin we must gather to see, to look square in the eyes, and with which we must reckon, the sin that's of our own making. It's only when we do this that we can find ourselves in that place where we're capable of being forgiven, restored, made whole – of being saved. It's only when we do this that we can find ourselves.

And it's only when we do this as part of a community that we have any hope of reckoning with the structural evil of rejecting God's gift of life in all its fullness.

The communal nature of sin and forgiveness that Numbers identifies is absolutely central, irrespective of the individual nature of our own sinfulness. Numbers reminds us – and John confirms – that we can't isolate the individual's personal fate from the context of community. No individual is named as the culprit in Numbers; it's about the community's collective failings, complaints, shared horror, and communal redemption.

That's why it's wrong to focus only on John 3:16; it reduces our lives to mere preparation for what is to come, rather than celebrating, engaging, and sharing in the here-and-now gifts of God that can free us.

So what about Leon? The third paranoid schizophrenic? He began to recover after one day blurting out “I am dirt.” No longer the fantasy that he was a perfect being, beyond human existence, living some glorified life, but a human being capable of failing, of being – at least in part – like dirt. It was only when he was capable of gazing at the bronze serpent that wholeness became a possibility for him.

And the irony for him and for us is that when we embrace our own humanity, in all of its richness and squalor; when we no longer turn away from the bronze serpent, we are, in fact, on the journey to be one with Christ in God.

