



Lent 4-March 14, 2021

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

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

“Believe in Him”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior who was lifted on the cross for you, Amen.

The fourth Sunday in Lent is one of my favorite Sundays of the church year. It is on this Sunday my favorite verse John 3:16 is always included in the gospel reading. Each year the gospel from John includes different verses that surround this well-known verse that Martin Luther named as the gospel in a nutshell. In the reading for this year, you must look back a few verses to be reminded that Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, the religious leader who came to Jesus at night and was told by Jesus that he must be born again or from above to be saved. Not only are there different verses to preach on each year, but a preacher has more than enough to preach on for many years just from the single verse John 3:16. I almost selected this image for the cover of the bulletin today. This image by highlighting different words nicely shows how every word in this most widely memorized and most well-known verse in the bible has significance. A different sermon could be preached by looking at each separate word in John 3:16. Today I have chosen to do as Jesus did by making the comparison from the first lesson for today when Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness to when he, the Son of Man, would be lifted on the cross. These two scriptures have striking similarities and vast differences, just as you find the phrases “Believe in yourself” and “Believe in Him”.

*Both phrases can easily be found in home decor stores and unfortunately both can be found in Christian bookstores as well. Some people have been led to understand that you can't believe in God unless you first have faith in yourself, but such an idea is not found in scripture. Two of these three words are identical. Believe in. These two words identify the importance of faith, trust and believing in something. It can be said that there is no such person as an atheist. An atheist is defined simply as someone who lacks belief in the existence of God or gods. Everyone looks to something or someone, especially in the time of trouble, even if the god they look to is found by looking in a mirror. As you hear several times in today's gospel the last word of this phrase is not yourself, but him. Believing in yourself will help you in this life, but believing in God, **in him**, is how God has chosen to give you eternal life.*

The Israelites had started believing in themselves as they wandered in the wilderness. They were no longer satisfied with the provisions that God had been giving to them. However, faith in themselves didn't satisfy their hunger or thirst either. But they didn't blame themselves, instead they spoke against God and blamed him for leading them into the wilderness and causing their problems of hunger and thirst. After including Moses with God to receive a share of the blame, the Lord sent poisonous serpents or as other versions describe these snakes as fiery serpents all around the people which caused death when the people were bitten by them. I detest snakes so much that I would have asked Moses to pray to remove the snakes if the snakes would have just been harmless baby garter snakes slithering around me. But these snakes were poisonous and dangerous

and caused death. I suspect some of the Israelites would be like some of you who are not afraid of snakes and at first might have picked them up to scare others, but we learned that everyone was afraid of these snakes because these snakes led to death.

Believing in themselves did nothing to remove the death that these snakes were causing. The Israelites had to look to someone other than themselves to remove the death they caused. Having this problem that they could not solve may have reminded them of the Lord who had provided for them in the past and **so** they asked Moses to pray on their behalf to have the snakes removed so they wouldn't have to fear death.

I am trying hard to limit the use of the word, "so" from my vocabulary. I share this problem of overusing this word with others. I find myself starting sentences with this word. **So**, I have been trying hard not to use it as often. This two-letter word appears in both this story of the snakes and John 3:16. This little word however serves a greater purpose than how I use the word unnecessarily. After the Israelites asked Moses to pray to have the fiery serpents removed, scripture says, "**SO** Moses prayed for the people." John 3:16, says, "God **SO** loved the world." We most often hear the word "so" as a measure of how much love God has for the world or Moses prayed because the complaints of the people had reached a level that Moses got tired of hearing their complaints, **SO** he prayed. Deeper study of this word really means something different than a measurement of something. Instead, the word **SO** is better translated "for this reason". Moses prayed not because the serpents had reached a point of so many deaths. Moses prayed **for the reason** that the Lord alone would be able deal with the deaths that the serpents were causing. In the same way, the Lord didn't send Jesus because his love had reached a point after so many people had died because of sin, but he sent his son **for the reason** that only he could put an end to death.

Notice God's response to the prayer that the Israelites asked Moses to pray. Their prayer was specifically for God to remove the serpents. The Lord's response was to make a poisonous snake and put it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten would live by looking at it. The Lord used a serpent to give life to those who were bitten by a serpent. The Lord did not remove the serpents. If he had, with the serpents gone, the Israelites would have hung their plaques back on the walls in their homes that say, "Believe in yourselves". The Israelites never really admitted that they had started to trust in themselves. They just needed a little extra help from the Lord to get through this time when the snakes showed up and if the Lord could have just gotten them through fiery snakes and give them better food and water again, they could get by on their own just fine. But the Lord's answer to their prayer was to look to him and not themselves.

God sent his son for this same reason. God has not removed the serpents that represent the evil that surrounds you in this world. We may wonder why when we pray for cancer to be removed from this world, God doesn't. We may wonder why when we pray for news stories of injustices and unkindness and devastations of all kinds to be replaced with stories of people being nice to each and stories when poverty is replaced with prosperity. God doesn't always answer our prayers this way. It isn't that God doesn't hear our prayers, God answers by sending his only Son to give us more than life in this world, but life in this world and eternal life.

If you haven't already memorized Ephesians 2:8,9 that is found in the second lesson for today, highlight it in your bulletin and do so. It is one of the few verses underlined in my confirmation bible. **For by grace, you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so (there's that word again) that no one may boast.** This verse takes down the plaque that says "Believe in yourself" so that you don't boast in yourself and replaces it with "Believe in Him" knowing who has saved you.

You have been saved. Did you hear that? You have already been saved. Eternal life is not a reward that will be given to you later. God has already sent his son into the world. Just as the Lord instructed Moses to lift a serpent on a pole so that those who were bitten by serpents would live, even more so, (I did it again), God lifted his Son, Jesus Christ, on a Cross and through his death, death has no power over you.

And this verse from Ephesians adds still another word of good news. Faith in God, believing in him is not something that is your own doing. Faith has been given to you and has been given to you again through the hearing of this Word. Amen