

Sermon
Lent 4B – March 10, 2024
John 3:14-21

Today's gospel story comes from the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. The first part of that conversation is the whole "born from above" or "born again" thing. And then Jesus begins referencing his crucifixion and the purpose of his incarnation. As sort of an explanation for his crucifixion, he recalls the story of Moses and the infestation of poisonous serpents among the Israelites, which we heard earlier.

First off, let me just say that the story of the poisonous serpents is one of the most, if not the most, bizarre stories in the Bible. The people complain about Moses and God, God sends poisonous serpents that bit and killed the Israelites, they said sorry, God tells Moses to craft a bronze serpent on a pole, and whoever looks at it after being bit will live. It's a weird story.

And it will continue to be weird because I'm not going to talk about this story. Neither am I going to talk about the similarities of the crucifixion with Jesus being raised up on a cross to give life like the bronze serpent was raised up on a pole to give life. Instead, I want to talk about why Jesus came into the world. According to John 3:16, for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Additionally, God did not send the Son to condemn the world.

I want to go back to the temptation story from Luke. In that story, Jesus was faced with three temptations: stones to bread, bowing down to Satan, and jumping from the top of the temple. The second one had an important detail in it; any ideas what that was? It was that all the kingdoms of the world had been given over to Satan for him to do with as he pleased. This is one of the places where we get the idea that the world has gone to hell in a handbasket, or the idea that we are IN the world, not OF the world. Or any number of other theologies that state the world is a bad place and we just need to get to heaven to be okay.

Seeing the world as a bad or evil place ruled by Satan will lead to other problems, not the least of which is religious fanaticism. Religion, any religion, can find fault with anything. Religious fanatics will then use their religion to stamp out, dominate, and demonize people and ideas they don't like.

Everything from the fight to keep slavery, to laws that keep women under control, to prohibition, to book bans, to Jim Jones, to the Jewish and Native American holocausts, and more are driven by the belief that the world is evil and we must exert our religious authority to wipe it out. People spend a whole lot of time condemning things and people they don't like.

Don't get me wrong, there are certainly things that need to be condemned – child abuse, human trafficking, spousal abuse, and animal abuse are at the top of that list. This is not a free-for-all. But not everything you don't like is evil.

Which brings me back to the temptation of Christ. Satan said all the kingdoms of the world had been given to him. But whose were they to begin with? In the beginning, God created. When you get right down to it, everything belongs to God. Jesus had no need to receive them from Satan because they were/are his all along. And if they are God's, do they need to be condemned? The Gospel of John says, "No."

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved.

Granted, John does use condemnation language, but we must be careful when looking at it. For John, condemnation is a refusal to accept the gift of new life found in Jesus. If a person accepts that gift, they will

receive the gift of eternal life, the bread of heaven, and living water as presented in Christ. If a person refuses that gift, then they remain on the outside, in the outer darkness so to speak, and they have condemned themselves to death. John's condemnation is the self-condemnation of refusing the gift Christ offers. They have chosen darkness over light.

That condemnation doesn't come from God or the Son - "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world" - and it certainly doesn't, and shouldn't, come from us.

If Jesus himself didn't come to condemn the world, what makes anyone else think it's our job to condemn others? It's almost like some people think they have been given authority to rule over the world. But the only one who said he would grant that authority was Satan. So . . . who are those people who are busy condemning others really following?

We are not here to wield earthly power. We are not here to force other people to bend or bow to our religious interpretations. We are not here to create a theocracy. And we are certainly not here to condemn others.

What we are here to do is to offer the love of God as exemplified in Christ to the world around us in thought, word, and deed.

We offer the love of God in thought - how we think about people shapes how we speak and act toward them. We offer the love of God in our words - how we speak to and about people shapes how others see how God shapes us.

We offer the love of God in our actions - how we act toward others speaks volumes about how we see them as people of God.

For us here at Saint Luke's, we do these things through our interactions in the Community, through our acts of Compassion, through our faithful Contemplation, and through our involvement in the Culture.

If we are followers of Christ, then we are not called to condemn people. Neither are we called to preach a message of turn or burn. But like Christ, we are called to love sacrificially and be the light that points to the way of life. Christ did not come to condemn the world. What makes anyone else think it's their job to do so?

Amen.