

John 3: 14-21: Like it or not

As I mentioned just before I read the passage from Numbers a passage from it being included in the lectionary cycle is rare. It is obvious that the reason for this Numbers selection is that our Gospel passage from John begins with a reference to this event during the wilderness journey of the people God brought up from Egypt. To understand why Jesus mentions this event involving a serpent it might help to go through why Moses lifts up a serpent. When this event happens, it hasn't been long since the people were camped at Mount Sinai. There they had accepted a covenant with God and made some promises. Among them they promised to honor God who had chosen them. Yet here they are complaining again—speaking against God as well as Moses. They don't appreciate the provision God is making for them. In this passage we are told this time their lack of gratitude so angered God that poisonous snakes came among them and many died. Of course the next thing that happens is very predictable. The people go to Moses, admit that they have sinned against the Lord and ask Moses to intercede for them. And once again, Moses prays for the people. But what happens next in the story seems rather odd to me. God does not take away the serpents. They remain in the area where the people continue to travel and as they travel they continue to be bitten. However God provides a way of healing for them. Despite the provision about making graven image in that covenant agreement, Moses is told by God to make an image of the serpent and then place it on a rod or staff rather like an ensign or banner. This is set up in the camp and carried with them. When someone is bitten, they look up at that image and are healed. When this is done, since the image is of what is causing them to die, perhaps the people are not inclined to worship it. To be healed the people have to see the source of death. Looking upon it serves to focus their attention also on the source of their healing—and since the danger remains present perhaps they are not inclined to turn their attention away from what God provides and worship the image itself. Working on how that turns out is another sermon for another day. The importance of the story for us this morning is that it is the healing nature of the serpent image which Moses made that Jesus is referring to as our passage begins. In our Gospel passage, Jesus uses this image to refer to his being lifted up on the cross, a cross which then becomes a source of healing and reconciliation with God for us. That's a long discourse just to explain the opening image of this passage, but hopefully it places it in context. This gospel passage is part of a conversation which Jesus has with the Pharisee Nicodemus who comes to visit Jesus in the night. It is a discussion about how one enters the kingdom of God. Jesus tells Nicodemus that entering the kingdom is God will be made possible by what he is going to do. After the opening verse the remainder of the Gospel passage is much more familiar to us. In fact this passage contains a verse that almost seems to have a life of its own. For some reason at ballgames, whether baseball or softball, when the game is being televised, sometime during the broadcast the camera will focus on someone in the stand with rainbow colored hair wearing this verse's location in the Bible on their chest or holding a sign giving it. You see this on bumper stickers and the back of semi trailers going down the highway. It is one of the few verses that you can give its location within Scripture and most, if not everyone who hears that identifier is able to recite the verse. You probably already know which verse in the passage I am referring to: John 3: 16. If I asked you to recite it, I am sure that you could: "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.” In fact, it is so well known that now coffee mugs, etc. which reference it do not actually quote the verse, but just print John 3:16 on them based on the assumption everyone knows what the verse says. Many people will tell you that it is their favorite Bible verse. Martin Luther said that in this statement Jesus articulates the “Gospel in a nutshell.” But there is more than just a statement about God’s love present here. This verse proclaims that God is fundamentally a God of love; that love is the logic by which the kingdom of God runs, and that God’s love trumps everything else in the end. At first glance that seems like something that we all agree with, right? But if we think about it a little longer, what does that say about another attribute that we attribute to God...righteousness or justice. So when we embrace the words of John 3:16 are we making a choice about what we believe about God’s nature? Do we see God primarily as a God of love or a God of justice? The word primarily means that it is not totally an either/or choice. But still it is a choice which affects our view of everything we understand about God. The two are not completely separate from each other. Justice, at its best, flows from a sense of love, and love demands justice. So when we speak of God’s love, we need to also remember God’s justice. Of course within the verse there is a conditional phrase about God’s love—the ones given eternal life are those who believe in him. But the next statement in the passage states: Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” John’s gospel contains many images set up as either/or situations. Light verses dark; Spirit verses flesh etc. And throughout most of John the world is presented as a place full of enmity toward God. But Jesus professes that God loves this God-hating world so much that God is willing to give to it God’s only Son. This passage does also speak about judgment. Those who do not believe are condemned already because of their unbelief. Yet the judgment which is described as their fate does not sound like the punishment we expect. There is no description here of eternal torment. What John says about the fate of the unbelievers is that they love darkness and avoid the light; that those who do evil hate the light and thus do not come into it because they fear it. This is not judgment as punishment, but judgment as tragedy, as loss, as separation from God. God comes in love to redeem such loss, turn such tragedy into victory and demonstrate true power through sheer vulnerability and self-sacrifice. The question then becomes do we still name this as our favorite verse. Since our world—and quite often our lives—operate according to the more traditional belief that security comes not through vulnerability and sacrifice but through power and might. We probably would not want to go around wearing a t-shirt or buy a mug that says “might makes right, but we regularly live according to such logic. For the world we live in seeks security not only through power but also through wealth and consumption. We are taught from a very early age to avoid true vulnerability—and also the truly vulnerable—whenever and wherever we can. And that part about self-sacrifice? Sure, when we can afford to. And that instruction to love our enemies? Maybe, if everything else is taken care of first so that we are protected. Vulnerability? Only if there is no other choice. The kind of self-sacrificing love that Jesus offers and holds up as a model is frightening to our world and us. No wonder when the light of Christ’s self sacrificing love comes into the world, darkness is appealing to the people as stated in verse 19. For in the darkness the selfishness of the world is not easily seen. Most of us find it impossible to embrace Jesus’ example. In the gospel accounts we have of Jesus’ life

and ministry, notice that God did not ask permission first before sending Jesus to die for us. God chose to provide a way for us to be healed. Now that may seem like an odd detail to point out. Of course God doesn't ask permission—God is sovereign. But consider this. Think of the claim a person—any person—has on us once they've saved our life, let alone have died doing it. In the face of such love, such sacrifice, we must surrender all of our claims. And we often resent those to whom we are indebted. God has basically taken a dominant stand with regard to humanity—God has chosen us, we are claimed by this love—like it or not. In the face of such unconditional love, we are powerless. Yes, we have some options. We can choose to accept it or not, perhaps we choose to run away from it, but we cannot influence it, manipulate it, or control it. It is only when we have died to all of our delusions of actually being in control that we realize such loss of perceived freedom and power is actually life. God's love is tenacious. God's love will continue to chase after us, seeking to hold onto us and redeem us all the days of our lives whether we like it or not. So perhaps if we take this verse seriously, we might not like it so well. It points out our dependence on God's love—but then again it points out that this is one relationship we cannot screw up. Because God created it, God maintains it, and God will bring it to a good end, all through the power of God's vulnerable, sacrificial, and ever so tenacious love offered to a world whether it likes or wants it or not.