

John 3: 14-21 Hiding in the Dark

The two texts before us today are a striking contrast. The gospel passage contains one of the most well known and beloved verses in our Scriptures while the passage from Numbers is obscure and not at all comforting. The phrase Thanks be to God after its reading might have a question mark after it—God’s anger in conjunction with a snake infestation doesn’t sound like good news. Yet clearly the Numbers’ text was one which was well known in the Jewish tradition of Jesus’ time because it describes the event to which Jesus refers when Nicodemus comes to visit. Because of its presence within the gospel reading, we need to consider what message about himself Jesus is conveying to Nicodemus and us. The context of the Numbers 21 text is that wilderness experience of the Israelites as they are fleeing Egypt and slavery. The basis of this text could have been describing any of several times in this journey—the Israelites were complaining about this wilderness experience—but by this point God has provided for them many times—manna and meat, sweet water—in the wilderness. Yet they persist in complaining, God becomes angry and Moses intercedes for them is a familiar cycle in the Exodus text. This text begins with the information that the people become impatient with the route they are taking to the land promised, so again they speak against God and Moses in the same manner they have used before: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” Within this very complaint, it is obvious God has provided—they just aren’t pleased with the “miserable food.” This time God’s anger is shown by the arrival in their camp of poisonous snakes. People are bitten and they die. Although the text does not explicitly say the snakes are sent because of what has been said against God—the lack of trust, it is clear that the people view the arrival of the snakes in that light. This is reflected in the people’s response-- they go to Moses confessing that how they have spoken against God and Moses is wrong and ask Moses to again intercede for them so that the serpents will be taken away. It is not unusual for God to be angry at these people that have been claimed—they are the chosen covenanted people yet they continue to lack trust and remain rebellious. Yet God’s actions are consistently described as ones designed to build trust, as God provides for their needs. It seems that once they were delivered from the oppression of Egypt, their memory of the actual experience becomes hazy. It appears much better in their rear-view mirror. This text seems especially strange as the people have recently left Mt. Sinai after God made covenant with them and gave them the commandments which informed them of God’s expectations for their behavior. Among the first of these instructions was the command to not make any image having the form of anything---anything at all, specifically naming all creatures which existed in the heavens, the seas, the earth which could then be worshiped. They were not to create objects or idols to worship. God’s response to Moses’ intercession is to command Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole for the people to look at. The snakes were not driven from the camp, but remained so that people were still being bitten. But now, when they were bitten, they looked upon the bronze serpent on the pole and then lived instead of dying. This bronze serpent is carried with the people as they continue to wander in the wilderness—the image of the serpent is changed from something which conveys death to something which brings healing and life. I would imagine that since the poisonous nature of the serpents is not changed, that the people would not be

inclined to worship serpents, but would look and see the healing God provided for them. It seems to me that this is the connection between the Hebrew Scripture's presentation of God's power intervening between something that causes death and transforming that image into something which gives life. In the gospel passage from John, Jesus' ministry is just beginning. A well-respected Pharisee named Nicodemus has either heard or heard of the teachings of this young itinerant rabbi. In all of John's careful expositions, the setting is important. It is crucial that Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night—in the dark. Nicodemus' approach shows that he wishes to learn from Jesus as a teacher who has come from God. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs apart from the presence of God." The text does not tell us to what signs Nicodemus refers, but Jesus' opening statements serve to totally confuse Nicodemus with the idea of being born from above. In their conversation, Nicodemus is thoroughly obsessed with the physical, the earthly implications of Jesus' teachings—he wants the pragmatic description of how this feat of being born again from above can happen. He wants the instruction manual. When Jesus continues to speak, we get the puzzling verse that begins the passage read earlier, that reference to the wilderness experience: "And 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." This verse has two time related aspects—it looks back to the tradition known to both Jesus and Nicodemus and it looks forward-- a foreshadowing of the cross upon which Jesus will be "lifted up." Just as the serpents were a means which brought about death, so the Roman cross was the means by which Rome brought death to any challenge to their power. Just as God's power made that bronze serpent on a rod the instrument bringing life in the midst of deadly serpents, God's powerful love made Rome's death threat into the promise of eternal life in a sinful world. When we look upon the cross we see this promise of deliverance from our sin. The cross is no longer about punishment or payment, but about the healing offered through God's love. That is, the cross according to John's gospel is not Jesus' moment of humiliation or defeat or abandonment as we often view it through the lens of the synoptic gospels, but rather it is the moment of Jesus' greatest glory, his elevation as he achieves the mission for which he came into the world. In John 19:30 Jesus from the cross proclaims: It is finished, or as it can also be translated it is accomplished. Jesus is elevated, both physically on the cross and metaphorically showing God's love and power so that the whole world can see God's great act of redemption and healing. In John, there is no mention of punishment or payment for sin, as the cross is not a mechanism that effects salvation but the sign that reveals God's love for the wayward world in terms which cannot be denied. Thus the favorite verse that anchors this passage: "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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." These verses are indeed the good news, the gospel news we are told to share. But Nicodemus' visit did not conclude there as his departure is not mentioned. Although he asks no more questions, but simply disappears from the text apparently still in the dark. John's gospel is very concerned with images of light and dark—and Jesus continues what actually seems to be more a monologue at this point than a conversation. "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the

light and do not come to the light so that their deeds may not be exposed.” And this is the judgment...seems to indicate the possibility of punishment as translated here, and in other translations where it is phrased...”and this is the condemnation...but the Greek is somewhat more nuanced than those translations indicate. There is undeniably a judgment mentioned, but the sense is that it is more of an evaluation of people’s reaction to the presence of light. In this case it is a description of what has happened—the light has come into the world, but it seems that light is not exactly welcomed because of what the light reveals. People love to remain in darkness where their deeds are not exposed. That emphasis might help us hear these verses after 3:16 as more descriptive of our behavior than accusatory. Those who believe that God is love are saved, they look to the One lifted up for healing and are restored to health and life abundant. Those who cannot imagine God comes bringing love rather than punishment are lost, lost to their despair, sin and confusion. This verdict, conclusion, judgment, revelation whatever term you want to apply recognizes that we love darkness more than light because we have the same trust issues the Israelites had. We find it hard to imagine God being different than we are; that we do not want to admit our need and receive God’s grace and forgiveness; that there is something in us that fears being exposed and perhaps we assume, being rejected. Or perhaps we fear the power of the light after exposing the darkness within, to then transform us. You see, the news that Jesus is the light...is good news or bad depending upon what you’re doing when that light shines in your place of darkness. J.K. Rowling whose books depict a fictional struggle between good and evil wrote: “We’ve all got both light and dark inside us. What matters is the part we choose to act on.” In our sin, in the thoughts we have and the actions we do which do not reflect those teachings of Jesus we proclaim we follow, we are living in darkness. And we want to hide these things, this darkness, from one another—and often desire to ignore their existence within ourselves. It’s not like ignoring our sin will make it go away. In fact, it actually becomes worse because when we ignore it because we can then convince ourselves that we don’t need saving. And the more we hide these things in our darkness, the harder it is to move toward and accept the saving grace that we need so desperately. So how do we move from our love of darkness into a place of light? One approach is a sin-punishing strategy—creating shame, guilt, condemnation...toward others or within ourselves. But that really won’t move us into the light. Remember verse 17: Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. What Jesus offers in the light is a place where our brokenness is revealed, where we can name it. But the place Jesus offers is safe—it is a place of grace and forgiveness. That is why our service includes a prayer of confession—a place we go after lifting praise to God and considering God’s almighty acts which illuminates our brokenness and need for repentance. In naming our brokenness we acknowledge our need for God, God’s love and forgiveness offered to us in grace and mercy. And having acknowledged our darkness we no longer need to hide in the dark because we have the assurances, the promises of God that through Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Thanks be to God.