

Serpents and Salvation

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Preaching on:
John 3:14–22

John 3:16, is traditionally rendered, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” It’s one of the most

famous and well-known verses in all of sacred scripture. Love, generosity, salvation! John 3:16 invites us into an expansive vision of salvation—one that is inherently "Bigger Than Me." But we worry about the perishing part.

"That whosoever believeth in him should not perish" can all too easily be flipped around to say, "that whosoever believeth *not* in him *should perish, will perish, is already perished!*" And we worry about our Jesus, who is supposed to save the world with love, becoming the one who somehow casts the vast majority of the human race into the eternal firepits of hellish damnation that have so captivated the febrile imagination of the Evangelical movement.

Have you heard the story of "Rock'n" Rollen Stewart? Beginning in the early 80s, "Rock'n" Rollen Stewart, also known as "The Rainbow Man," would strategically buy tickets to major sporting events where he was sure that he'd be in the background on a lot of the televised shots. He would wear this rainbow-colored afro clown wig, he'd hold up a big JOHN 3:16 sign, and make as much of a nuisance of himself as possible—jumping up and down and waving his signs around whenever the camera was on him. When people asked why he did it, he simply said he wanted to get the word out.

But in the early 90s, after a number of tragic life events and believing that the Final Judgment was imminent, "Rock'n" Rollen Stewart began terrorizing churches he disagreed with by stink bombing them. He began mailing out "hit lists" filled with the names of preachers he disagreed with, and he didn't sign them "The Rainbow Man," he signed them "The Anti-Christ."

Then in 1992 he used a gun to kidnap two day-laborers and a hotel maid. He ended up barricaded in a hotel room holding the maid hostage. The police were outside the room shining these big, bright lights through the windows. And Rock'n Rollen (this is for real) used his JOHN 3:16 signs—he taped them up in the windows—to block out the light.

The very same signs, and the very same verse, meant to bring light into the world and to invite the world into salvation, were now being used to hide in the darkness, to shut people out, and to condemn the world. And so some of us worry: Is John 3:16 an invitation to the good news or is it a sort of stink bomb—or worse? We worry because we know how much harm the Jesus who condemns people can do.

And at the same time, we know how powerful and good salvation can be. In 2018, I heard a speech given to New York City faith leaders by Matthew McMorrow. McMorrow is a gay activist and at the time he was a senior advisor to the mayor's community affairs unit. When he came out as a teenager his family didn't accept him, his friends didn't stick by him, and the faith community where he served as an altar boy made it clear that he was no longer welcome there. McMorrow had been condemned.

But at some point, he met a Lutheran pastor who told him, "Matthew, God loves you just as you are." And McMorrow told us with the relief still in his voice, "Those words *SAVED* my life." And hearing that

story we know that being saved is good! And we can't believe it leaves anybody out.

Acknowledging that the embrace of God's kingdom is "Bigger Than Me" means that it may well be bigger than my current understanding. And if it's true that people who don't believe the perfectly right things in the perfectly right ways are already condemned, then I am more certain than I am of anything, that I am one of those condemned people. Because I do not believe "perfectly." I'm a doubter. And to be honest I like it that way. Remember, Jesus taught us to be humble. And humility and doubt allow us to grow our faith commitment in ways that are not possible for "perfect" believers.

The Bible teaches us, "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world." Belief alone can never teach us this kind of discernment. Discernment requires doubt, it means taking nothing for granted, it means interrogating every good idea and venerated dogma.

Jesus said that the wheat and the chaff must grow together in the same field. That means you're never going to find a wheat field that doesn't have at least a few weeds lurking around in it somewhere. We typically interpret this parable to be about people. Some people are wheat and some people are weeds, and one good day God will harvest the field and send the wheat-people to heaven and the weeds-people to hell.

But I think this parable is about beliefs. Some of my beliefs glorify God and some of them don't. And as long as I'm alive, I better remember: I'm not always right. Christians are the ones who acknowledge their weeds and knowing we can't tear them all out, we have to at least be able to recognize them.

For example, there's not time to discuss the full history here this morning and all the reasons for why and how it happened, but the Gospel of John is a very anti-Jewish text—frequently condemning those Judeans or Jews who don't believe in Jesus. And that condemnation in our holy scripture has given rise to a terrible shadow. John's Gospel has been used to incite, justify, and perpetuate antisemitism for more than a thousand years.

And so, we (as Christians) don't get to take the easy way out. We don't get to simply take the plain sense of the text without looking too deeply into the shadows we cast. We don't get to scoop up our salvation and leave the rest of the world to be damned. We must find the courage to discern.

And Jesus gives me that courage and that example. Jesus said, "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Jesus is referring to a gem of a story from the Torah about God getting sick of the Israelites complaining in the wilderness. God decides to teach them a lesson by sending poisonous snakes to bite them. The quickly repentant Israelites, dropping dead from snake bites, ask Moses if there's anything he can do. So, Moses prays to God and God tells him to cast a bronze statue of a serpent and to put it on top of a pole. Whenever anyone is bitten, all they have to do is look at the bronze

serpent and they'll be healed. And that's what Moses does. And anyone who gets bit by a snake on the ground can be saved by looking at the snake on the pole.

It's an interesting story. You've got to wonder why God didn't just make the snakes go away so that nobody would be bitten anymore. Well, snakes had two very different reputations in the ancient world. They were a symbol of death and evil for reasons we still understand today. But they were also symbols of healing and resurrection because of the way they shed their old, dead skin to reveal a shiny, healthy skin underneath. It's almost like the story of the snake on a pole is trying to tell us something true about the world: there are snakes in the world that can kill you, and there are snakes that can heal you.

And Jesus says, "Yeah! I'm *that* snake—the healing snake lifted up in the wilderness. I wish I could just snap my fingers and make all the toxic and poisonous versions of God's love that are slithering around in the world go away. But I can't. I can only lift my true self up with love in the hope that I can heal those who have been bitten."

Beloved, keep your eyes peeled for snakes. They're out there! But don't be afraid to lift up the One who heals with love. I think that many of you have met that Jesus. And he's offering himself as a gift to the whole world—to every person, no matter how or what they believe, no matter what evil thing has latched itself to them. Don't be afraid to lift your Jesus up higher.