

March 10, Lent 4B (Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21)

When John 3 came up I used to preach on the dangers of fixating on one verse. Now I cringe at that memory.

by [E. Carrington Heath](#) in the [March 2024](#) issue

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One Sunday, while preaching on this text, I told a story about seeing someone in the stands at a football game holding a sign that said “John 3:16.” I was a kid, and I thought John must be a football player with an unusual number on his jersey.

I now know the backstory of how that verse came to dominate sports arenas. A man named Rollen Stewart wanted to spread the gospel and so would position himself in the stands with signs or shirts with a Bible passage that he believed summed it up: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Why Stewart chose this particular verse instead of any number of others remains a bit of a mystery, but the message continues to be hoisted up at Super Bowls and World Series decades later.

In my early years of pastoring I would see this passage in the lectionary and preach a sermon on the dangers of taking one verse out of context and making it your focus. I had good examples for this. In seminary I had heard the story of a professor who, when a conservative student talked about the promise of John 3:16, aggressively questioned him: “What about John 3:15? How about John 3:17?” The story got a lot of laughs around school from those of us who considered ourselves above bumper-sticker Christianity.

Years later I cringe a bit at that memory. The theologian in me still thinks our faith cannot be summed up by one Bible verse, but the pastor in me knows that every person who becomes spiritually curious enough to walk into a church on Sunday morning needs a starting place. I do not know for sure, but I would guess that at least a few people who saw those signs and tried to find out what they meant went

on to be deep-thinking Christians with fulfilling spiritual lives.

John's Gospel, unique in its non-synoptic form, emphasizes the mystery of a God who has always been with us and who chooses to come closer to us. The beauty of God as the Word made human is that we are a little less alone in the world. We are chosen by God as companions, not just in this life but in the next.

The author tells us that the Son of man must be lifted up just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. In that story from the Hebrew Bible, anyone bitten by a snake in the wilderness need only look up at Moses' staff, entwined with the serpent, and be healed. Simply by daring to look up, the mortally wounded are granted renewed life.

For John the good news is that we too, snakebitten by a world that is too often cruel and violent, may find new life. God's desire for us is not to suffer needless pain but to live abundantly. To know that Christ is there is to know that there is hope.

The lectionary passage ends with the interplay of light and darkness. Those who love the darkness do so out of a fear that the light will expose their evil deeds.

Conversely, those who long for light, we are told, do so because it allows the world to know all that is good that has been done in God's name.

We know the dangers now of equating light with goodness and darkness with sin. It is also easy to fall into the ableist trap of focusing only on eyesight and the ability to see. But there is a bigger theme here: What do we choose to lift up?

The work of the church is to lift up Jesus so that those who need healing can find it, whether held above the crowds or brought to the sides of all who travel painful roads or live broken lives. This is evangelism in its truest form, the spreading of hope to those who can barely go on. God's participation in our whole, enfleshed lives is God's promise that there is something more.

The people who gather in our pews on Sunday mornings rarely do so in order to feel smug about the superiority of their faith. Sometimes they come because they know the roads of this world are often filled with venomous serpents, and they are weary. The Sunday morning work of the preacher is to raise up the sign of God's love and to strengthen the faithful of the church to do the same.