

Lent 4 (B)
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Text: John 3:31-38

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The Gospel of John has a unique way of picturing Jesus. It is at the same time profoundly beautiful and profoundly challenging. John tells the story of Jesus as God's very own self-expression, the Word of God in the flesh. Jesus speaks the truth and shows the truth of God's love, but is consistently misunderstood. He is rejected by the religious authorities and put to death in the most cruel and painful way—nailed to a cross. But John insists that this is what God's glory and God's power look like. This is the most amazing and beautiful display of God's love. It is on the cross that Jesus is revealed as this world's true king! As I've struggled to express the truth of John's vision, here's the best image I can think of to explain what reading the Gospel of John feels like to me. It's like those "magic eye pictures" that my kids used to enjoy. They're prints that, at first glance look like random, gaudy blobs of color. But when you hold the picture right up close, and if you look at it just right, all of a sudden you see a pattern emerge—maybe it's a picture of a shark, or a horse, or who knows what.

Just like those magic eye pictures, John's vision is almost impossible to see at first. It might seem absurd, or even deeply offensive—God's love looks like an innocent man, beaten, naked, tortured, bleeding and dying in pain? I wonder whether our gospel reading for today might serve as a kind of key to this magic-eye sort of puzzle. It's difficult, though, because the words are not only so well known, they've also been twisted by time and translation, so that it's really hard for us to hear what John wants us to understand. I'd like to invite you to share a deep dive into the words and imagery of these very familiar verses, and I hope it helps you see what John wants us to see—that Christ crucified is the power and glory and healing love of God.

Our passage begins with Jesus referring to a strange old story from the Hebrew Scriptures. After Moses had led the people out of slavery in Egypt, when the people wandered in the wilderness for years, life was hard for them. They began complaining about their situation and complaining about Moses and complaining about God. In essence, God had given them freedom, but their response was to reject God and rebel against God. So God sent poisonous snakes, which bit people, and some of them died. Then, when the people came to Moses, acknowledging their fault and saying, "We have sinned," God told Moses to make a snake of bronze and set it up on a pole. When anyone who had been bitten by a snake looked up at the bronze image on the pole, they would be healed. In other words, when the people saw the reminder of their sin, a concrete depiction of their part in the mess they were in, they were able to receive God's gift of healing. I know, it's a strange story, but it expresses an important truth. We can't receive the

life God wants to give us until we see how much we need it and recognize that we are part of the problem.

Jesus calls on this story about the snakes to help us see him more clearly. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” Jesus will be lifted up on the cross, subjected to every cruelty his tormenters can imagine, and be put to death. And here is what he means: it must happen this way so the whole human family can see him, beaten and bloodied, and recognize that this is what our business-as-usual leads to. We have all had a hand in creating and perpetuating this kind of world. Humanity’s business as usual is all about winners and losers, about me and mine and more-more-more. It doesn’t matter whether it comes from greed or fear or entitlement or ignorance—Jesus lifted up on the cross is a perfect mirror for our world. And from the cross, Jesus is calling us all to acknowledge the cost of failing to recognize every person as our neighbor, as a beloved child of God. Jesus is lifted up so that we can own our part in this collective mess we find ourselves in, and recognize how much we need healing. Because like Moses’ snake, Jesus lifted up is all about God giving healing, giving us the life that really is life, the life and blessing that our hearts most deeply long for.

Jesus, lifted up, is all about God’s love for this world, which brings us to what is probably the most well-known verse in the whole Bible: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” There are three phrases I want to focus on to help us hear what John wants us to hear. The first is “For God so loved the world.” The second is “everyone who believes in him.” And the third is “have eternal life.” With each of these, I’m convinced that it’s easy to hear something in English that is different from what John meant in Greek.

First then: “For God so loved the world.” In English, it’s easy to hear something like “God loved the world so much,” or “God felt such deep love for the world,” but that isn’t what John is saying. A better way of expressing what is in the Greek would be: For in this way—that is, through Jesus lifted up—God acted with love for the world. This verse is about God not giving up on this wounded, hurting world. God is completely committed to our sad, self-destructive human family. Just as the story about the snakes told of God acting for healing then, now, in Jesus lifted up, God is acting for healing for us and for the whole human family. And here is how God acts: God gave his only Son.

And that brings us to “everyone who believes in him.” In English, the expression “believing in someone or something” has come to mean believing that such a person or thing exists (like believing in Sasquatch), or that something is true (like believing in a conspiracy theory). And that’s why we really need a different word, like trust. Jesus is asking us to trust him—to trust

that on the cross he shows us the truth about our world and the truth about God's commitment to us; to trust that in his way of loving God and loving neighbors he shows us the truth about a genuinely human life. Jesus calls us to follow him, trusting that his way of compassion and forgiveness and humility and generosity leads to a world that is being healed and made whole. You see, it's not just a matter of believing that Jesus tells the truth, but trusting that truth enough to devote our lives to it, to make Jesus' values our values and Jesus' priorities our priorities. That's what trusting Jesus is all about.

And finally, then, we turn to having eternal life. The first thing I hear in "eternal life" is life that lasts for eternity, forever. It pushes Jesus' promise out into a future we can't even imagine—and in that way it isn't very helpful. I'm convinced that Jesus wants us to experience, right now, the sort of life that belongs to eternity—life that is free from fear, free from hopelessness, free for genuine connection with each other. Even now, while the world around us is perishing, following Jesus' way of love opens space for us to experience at least something of the life that belongs to eternity—a life defined by love and peace, a life informed by hope and joy, a life that is being healed and made whole.

I wonder if you're beginning to see it yet—John's magic eye picture of Jesus. God spoke to us through Jesus. God spoke through all the ways Jesus lived with compassion and forgiveness, through his healing work and setting people free. Jesus lived such a beautiful life that the authorities became afraid his influence would compromise their grip on power, so they plotted to kill him. And rather than run or hide, Jesus continued his work of love right up until the end, when the authorities lifted him up on a cross. They thought they were putting an end to the threat they felt from Jesus, but there were two things they didn't know. They didn't know that Jesus, lifted up on the cross, would reveal every nasty little truth about this world we live in and how we treat each other as members of the human family. He would make it all undeniable. They also didn't know that Jesus would be lifted up by God, lifted up from death, up from the grave, lifted up to reign with God the Father. I wonder—can you see it? Jesus, lifted up on the cross for the healing of the world—there is the glory of God. There is the power and triumph of God. And there is the gift of God that sets us free. Thanks be to God. Amen.