

March 5, 2023 – John 3:1-17

Years ago, when I first decided to go to seminary and become a pastor, I needed to take an interview. I suppose the seminary wanted to do some initial vetting of seminary applicants before they even arrived on campus. And so they required that every applicant to the seminary be interviewed and given a preliminary approval by their circuit counselor.

So one afternoon, I drove down to his church and met with him in his office. We started the interview and he started asking me some basic questions. By biography. My interests. My church background. My ministry experience. Stuff I kinda expected.

And then he asked me a question that I will never forget: “What is the Gospel?” And I froze. I hadn't been especially nervous until that point. But suddenly, I was panicking. What... what is... the Gospel? It seemed like an absolutely enormous question. This is one question from a one hour interview, but it felt like something that deserved an entire essay to answer.

I stammered and stumbled and muttered. And he could clearly see that I was struggling. And he said, “Just... keep it simple.” Something I had once read from a completely non-Lutheran author popped into my head. “The Gospel is... love?” He seemed rather amused by my response and then shrugged, jotted something down on the sheet of paper in front of him, and said, “OK.”

Years later, I actually got to read what he wrote down under that question. “Mr. Ketelsen gave a thoughtful response.” Which I think was a nice way of not saying, “He froze like a deer in headlights.”

Obviously, the experience stuck with me and the question has continued to rattle around in my mind over the years. What is a good response to that question? Was my response really that bad?

Well, yes, but only because it was incomplete. The Gospel is love. But it's not just any love. It's God's love. God's love for the world. God's love for the world shown to us when he sent his Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life. That would have been a really good answer.

John 3:16. That's all I needed to say. It's the Gospel in a nutshell. It is, in many respects, the simplest and clearest expression of who Jesus is and what he came to earth to do. Which is what my answer was missing. Yes, the Gospel is love. But just as importantly, the Gospel is Jesus. The Son of God who came to save the world. Save the world from what? Save the world from itself, from Satan, and, most obviously, save the world from death.

That is the Gospel. That is the good news. And yet, even with a definition that is so clear, so concise, and so Biblical, it still leaves one very important lingering question. And it's a question which Christianity has sought to answer since Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. If Jesus conquered death by his death on the cross, why, then, do we still die? I think maybe that's the question I was trying to answer all those years ago. The question that needs an essay to answer.

In order to answer that question, we have to turn to the Book of Numbers and look at the Old Testament people of Israel. The children of Israel in Numbers chapter 21 are wandering in the desert. They are nearing the end of forty years of wandering. Forty years of God teaching them how to listen to his Word and trust that he will provide for all their needs, both physical and spiritual.

But the children of Israel are, well... they're dense. They are slow to learn. And above all, they are rebellious. Rebellious against Moses' leadership. Rebellious against God's Law.

They are so rebellious, in fact, that God finally gets really angry with them. He sends fiery serpents to go and bite them. Now, whether they were fiery because the bites felt like fire from the venom of the snakes or if they were literally on fire, we don't know. What we do know is that they were deadly. And many of the people died.

Which sounds harsh. But, on the other hand, it really shouldn't surprise us. They had sinned. They gravely sinned. They had rejected God's authority. And the wages of sin is death. Something that they knew. They had seen it in the plagues of Egypt. They seen it with Pharaoh's army, drowned in the Red Sea. But somehow, in their stubborn sinfulness, they had forgotten.

They remembered real quick. *“And the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people.”*

Moses was angry with the people too, but he recognized their repentance. So Moses prayed to God and God answered him. He gave Moses instructions on how to save the people. The Lord said to Moses, *“Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”*

So Moses does this. And you have to admit, this is rather... odd. Put a snake on a stick? Isn't a snake the form that Satan took in the Garden of Eden? Yes, it is. Isn't it snakes that are biting and killing them right now? Yes, it is. Why would they want to look at that? Well, that's kinda the point.

It's not something that they want to look at. God isn't commanding them to worship the snake. He's commanding them to look at. Look at this symbol of their sin. Look at this symbol of suffering and death. Look at this and remember that this is what you deserve. The wages of sin is death.

And then Moses led all the snakes away like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, right? Nope. The snakes still come. God didn't take away the serpents. He gave the people a way out, a way of salvation, so that even though they were bitten, the bite did not kill them. Whoever looked upon the bronze serpent in faith lived.

Now fast-forward to Jesus talking to Nicodemus in our Gospel lesson. Jesus uses this event from the Old Testament to show Nicodemus how God works. And he doesn't take death away. Not yet, at least. What he does is send his Son into a world of death, so that he dies in our place.

Think about those words of verse 16 for a moment. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.”* God loved the world and showed that love in this way: he handed over his only-begotten Son. To whom did he hand Jesus over? He handed Jesus over to sin, death, and Satan himself, the unholy trinity. The source of all the evil and suffering we all live with every day.

Jesus then takes the punishment that you deserve, gives you eternal life, which is his by nature, and sets you up as kings and queens in his eternal kingdom. All because God the Father hands him over to death.

And yes, you and I still suffer death and the effects of sin. We get sick and injured. Things don't work as they ought to work. The serpent still bites at your heels. But Jesus Christ has crushed the head of that old evil foe. By his death, he has destroyed death, so that what we endure and suffer now is mere aftereffects, rumblings and grumblings from a foe that has already lost but wants to drag as many down with him as he can.

Make no mistake, you are baptized. You belong to Christ. Satan cannot harm you. Jesus does not come into the world to go “tsk, tsk, tsk” at your sins and failures. He doesn't come to shake his head and tell you to do better next time. He doesn't come to give you only an example to shoot for, or a target to reach. His goals are much, much higher.

*“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* He didn't come to simply make you feel bad about your sin so that you would save yourself. He came to be your savior. To save you. To save the whole world.

That's God's plan. That's the Gospel. To save you, to heal you, to comfort you, to love you, and to give you hope. So that no matter how much the snake bites, you may lift up your eyes to the cross of Jesus Christ. And in that cross, in this proclamation that the wages of sin is death, you will find life—real, abundant life that has no end, because he has no end. Amen.