

**+ John 3:1-17 + Fix Your Eyes on Jesus—The Saving Son! +
+ 2nd Sunday in Lent + Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 12 March 2017 +**

“Who is Jesus?” That question has been on the minds of countless people for the past 2,000 years. Is he a prophet, a teacher, a miracle worker? Is he a real person or a fraud? Is he sent from God or a great deceiver sent from Satan? Is he just a man or is Jesus truly, fully human and truly, fully God?

“Who is Jesus?” has been on the minds of countless people for the past 2,000 years, but it’s not like people just started asking that question after his death. All kinds of people were asking that question throughout his life. People from every branch of the Jewish faith asked that question, including those many Old Testament believers who awaited the arrival of the promised Messiah. Rabbis and teachers of the Law and priests and lawyers and government officials and tax collectors and prostitutes and common, ordinary sinners all wondered who this Jesus was. “Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?”

Later in his ministry, Jesus himself posed that question to his twelve disciples. **“Who do you say that I am?”** Peter got up and gave a beautiful answer on behalf of the disciples, **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** (Matthew 16:15-16) To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, “You are neither liar nor lunatic. You are the Lord!”

What a faith-filled answer! Yet it took quite a while before Jesus’ followers got to that point. When Jesus traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover early on in his ministry, few people actually knew who he was. There were rumors swirling around about a prophet in Galilee who had transformed water into wine at a wedding feast. Yet other than a handful of disciples whom Jesus had called, few knew him.

That all changed, however, when Jesus entered the temple courts on a fine spring day just before the Passover celebration. What he found there was shocking. What he found was not the temple courts of the holy God, but a marketplace devoted to the almighty denarius. These were supposed to be the temple courts where God’s people came to make sacrifices, where God’s people came to pray and worship. However, rather than the sound of prayers rising with the incense, he heard sheep and cattle and the back and forth noise of business.

Righteous zeal for his Father’s house burned within Jesus. **“How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!”** (John 2:16) Tables crashed to the ground. Animals scattered, and coins and doves went flying everywhere. “How dare you do this?”, the people cried out. **“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”** (John 2:19) They didn’t understand his response, but in the days that followed, many saw Jesus perform miraculous signs. Many believed in him. He was a nobody no more, but few really knew who Jesus was.

One evening in Jerusalem, curiosity moved a man named Nicodemus to visit Jesus. He was a Pharisee—the strictest branch of the Jews with an extremely high regard for the Law of Moses often to the point of work-righteousness and a high regard for Scripture. Yet Nicodemus wasn’t your average Pharisee. He was **“a member of the Jewish ruling council,”** also known as the Sanhedrin, which was made up of the 70 most influential religious leaders in Israel. It served as the highest religious court in the land. As a member of that ruling council, Nicodemus was one of the most influential religious leaders in Israel, and he was curious. He wanted to know who Jesus was, but he wasn’t so bold about it. So they met under the cover of darkness.

“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” Nicodemus understood that Jesus came from God. He readily acknowledged that God had given Jesus the power to perform miraculous signs, but this leader didn’t see who Jesus was. He only thought Jesus was a heaven-sent teacher or prophet. Jesus had to open his eyes to see the kingdom of God, to see not just who Jesus was, but why he was there and what he had come to do.

“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” That went right over Nicodemus’ head. He couldn’t see how someone could be physically born a second time, but that’s not what Jesus was saying. Jesus corrected his thinking. **“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”** Jesus wasn’t talking about physical rebirth, but spiritual rebirth that brings a person into the kingdom of God, spiritual rebirth that happens through the Holy Spirit working through the water and Word of Holy Baptism, but Nicodemus still didn’t get it.

The evening was wearing on. Would Nicodemus ever be able to wrap his mind around what Jesus was saying? Would he ever get the answer to the question, “Who is Jesus?” You can sense a little frustration in Jesus’ response. **“You are Israel’s teacher...and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I**

“speak of heavenly things?” If Nicodemus couldn’t understand what Jesus was saying using ordinary imagery, how could he understand if Jesus spoke of ***“heavenly things”***?

So Jesus took a little different approach, one that didn’t require shouting into the teacher’s ear, “Hey Nicodemus! I’m the Son of God! I’m the Messiah sent from God!” With divine skill, Jesus took the heavenly truths he was trying to teach and made them so crystal clear that Nicodemus couldn’t not understand them. ***“No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”***

To put this heavenly truth into terms Nicodemus would understand, Jesus used a familiar illustration from Israel’s history. It wasn’t one of the high points in their relationship with God. God had delivered his people from slavery in Egypt and had richly provided for them in the wilderness, but they kept on rejecting him. One time God allowed poisonous snakes to come into the camp and bite the Israelites. As they were dying, they pleaded to Moses, their leader, to seek the Lord’s help. With undeserved mercy, God provided a way for them to live. He had Moses build a brass snake and place it on top of a pole for all to see. Those who looked at the snake would repent of their sin and live.

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up...For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...” Already in those early days of his ministry, Jesus had the cross in view. He knew he had to ***“be lifted up”*** on a cross if he was to save sinful humanity from eternal death. He knew he had to become an awful-looking object like that brass snake, because he would suffer what we deserve for our sins and be a reminder of the magnitude of our guilt. Why would the holy and innocent Son of God allow himself to endure all that? What was it that compelled him to continue on that path to the cross for three more long years? The self-sacrificing love of God moved him to save us.

That boundless, amazing, unfathomable, incredible, undeserved love of God moved him to deliver the wicked Israelites in the wilderness. It wasn’t their pleasant personalities or their kind gestures or their outward acts of worship. It was his love. Look inside yourself and what do you see? You see nothing good or attractive or deserving before God. The only thing we all deserve is God’s holy punishment, yet our heavenly Father was willing to give up for us what he treasured most—his one and only Son. That boundless, amazing, unfathomable, incredible, undeserved love of God for you and me moved him to make the ultimate sacrifice—to send his Son to live and die for you and me.

You and I are so often self-centered, always wondering “What’s in it for me?”, but the Son of God was totally focused on you and your salvation. The Son of God was willing to leave everything behind to give you everything. The love of the Son of God was more than just an emotion. It was perfect love that acted on our behalf—a love that was not only self-sacrificing, but soul-saving.

Jesus explains why ***“the Son of Man must be lifted up”*** – ***“...that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”*** Like the Israelites who looked to the hideous object of the brass snake to live as God had promised, Jesus directs your eyes to himself on the cross so you might see the depth of God’s love for you in his sacrifice and therefore live eternally. Looking to Christ is the only sure way for our souls to escape eternal death, but how can we do that?

Jesus invites us, as he did Nicodemus, to enjoy his saving love. He’s very clear about that. “Don’t you see it? It’s right here. The eternal deliverance I am accomplishing is right before your eyes—and it’s yours! Yes, ***‘whoever’*** includes you! Without my self-sacrificing, soul-saving love, you will perish in hell! See my love for you! Trust in me, your Savior!”

Through that Good News of God’s soul-saving love, Jesus sends his Holy Spirit so you can believe in him. Perhaps he did that for you when you were brought to the waters of Holy Baptism, where his forgiveness and life were poured out on you through water and the Word. Perhaps it was through the hearing of that message of God’s soul-saving love from a pastor or a parent or someone else you know and love. Either way Christ’s love moved him to make you his own through faith in him. Now heaven is yours because that saving Son loved you and me and this world more than we can imagine.

Nicodemus left that night pondering what Jesus had told him. Over time, that seed that Jesus had planted took root and bore fruit in Nicodemus’ life. Three years later, he wasn’t so timid anymore, helping to take the body of

his Savior—that body that had been lifted up for his sins—down from the cross to prepare it for burial in a borrowed tomb. Yet three days later, the Saving Son stood victorious. His followers, including Nicodemus, saw the Son of the living God standing before them very much alive. They wouldn't be so timid anymore.

So how will you answer that question, "Who is Jesus?" Timidly and fearfully, hiding in the darkness of your own privacy so others don't know or boldly and confidently, trusting in the soul-saving, self-sacrificing love of the Son who rescued you? Fix your eyes on Jesus—the Saving Son descended from heaven for you. Fix your eyes on Jesus—the Saving Son who was lifted up on a cross for you. Fix your eyes on Jesus—the Saving Son who will someday open your eyes to see the kingdom of heaven, your home with him for all eternity. Amen.