

**Fourth Sunday of Lent**  
**Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish**  
**St. Francisville, LA**  
**11 March 2018**

**John 3:14-21**

There is a particular scene in the comic strip Peanuts that goes like this: Lucy asks Charlie Brown: "Do you know what the problem is with you, Charlie Brown?" Charlie responds, "No, I don't." Lucy continues, "The problem with you is that you are you." A few days later Lucy again asks Charlie Brown, "Do you want to know what the problem with you is, Charlie Brown?" Charlie looks at her and says, "No, I don't! Go away and leave me alone!" He starts to walk away, but Lucy yells at him, "The Problem with you, Charlie Brown, is that you don't want anyone to tell you what the problem with you is." I believe Lucy is right.

John today presents us two different problems with two unique and unexpected solutions. **The first problem** is a series of snake bites that are killing a number of people in the desert. You heard the background in the reading from Numbers: The people rebel against God and Moses and as a result they are dying. I am sure they have tried everything possible to prevent these deaths, but nothing has worked. I imagine them building stronger tents, setting up fires around camp, keeping their children close, and not going out at night. Finally, after all else has failed, the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us."

I find it very interesting that God's solution to the problem is rather simple: Since the sin was ultimately a sin against God (grumbling and speaking against him), God and God alone has the solution to the problem. God orders the creation of a serpent of bronze to be placed in a pole and raised high. The only way the people are going to find healing is if they look up. Once they do, they see God's symbol of love and healing raised high. As they look up and see the serpent they are instantaneously reminded of their sin. The serpent represents their disobedience and their disloyalty towards God. The serpent is a reminder of judgement and condemnation. You can't look at the serpent without feeling shame and regret. That serpent brings about an awareness of their brokenness and their depravity. They have offended against a holy and good God. A God who liberated them out of slavery and destroyed the Egyptian taskmasters who oppressed them. They are an ungrateful and petty people who deserve to die in the wilderness because of their treason against God, the King of the Universe. Looking at the serpent hurts the eyes and pierces the soul, but they have no choice but to look up if they want to be healed. Healing can only come when they realize that the serpents are not the real problem. They themselves are the problem. They are a disobedient and disloyal people.

Jesus uses this well-known story from Numbers to illustrate the same problem to Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a teacher of the Law, comes to Jesus with a question and a problem.

He wants to know what he must do to be saved (John 3:1-10). Jesus responds by saying that he must be born again. He must become an infant. The great man is confused. How can this happen? Can one enter his mother's womb again? Jesus then explains what he means by being born again. In the same way that Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so that those bitten by poisonous serpents might be healed and live, "The Son of Man will be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." New life means to look at the Son of God lifted up and to believe that he is God's solution to the problem of sin.

This brings us to the **second problem**: the problem of Nicodemus's sin. Just as poisonous serpents are killing people in Numbers, Nicodemus feels that sin in all its forms and permutations is sentencing him to a death that is much worse than physical death. This death is eternal death, the death of the soul, the eternal judgement that he knows is destined for those who offend against God. As a good Pharisee, Nicodemus has tried all sorts of solutions. He has tried hard to follow Torah: he fasts, offers sacrifices, attends the prescribed festivals, engages in purity rituals, avoids sinners and prostitutes, pays the temple taxes, eats only kosher foods, etc. He has tried all he can. Still he feels condemned and judged. Still he feels destined for eternal death. He has not found the antidote to the snake poison of sin. He knows his time is coming and this brings great anxiety. He hopes Jesus may have a simple formula to solve his problem.

The solution to Nicodemus's problem is as unique as the solution to the problem the Israelites are having in the Book of Numbers. Since all sin is ultimately against God, God and God alone must come up with the solution. God's solution is to lift up his Son on a cross, "That everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." God has designed a unique and costly solution for this human problem, he sends his Son into the world, not "to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." The perfect human hangs on a tree, so that imperfect humanity might be saved from their own inhumanity and brokenness. The Son of God chooses death so that we might have life. This is the clearest sign of God's love for us.

My friends, as the Israelites had to look up to the raised serpent, so must we look up at the Son of God dying on a cross. A cross lifted up on a mountain so that the carnage and inhumanity may be seen by all. But, there is no way to look up at that cross without feeling shame and guilt. That cross reminds us of our failures, our self-directed ways, our exploitation of others, our tendency to self-gratification. There is no solution for our guilt and shame outside of the sacrifice on that cross. The cross of Christ acts as a powerful light that uncovers all that is hidden in our hearts. That cross reveals to us what we want so strongly to cover up and to deny. That light uncovers the darkness of our passions and affections. It illumines the dark corners of our souls and allows us to see ourselves as we truly are: broken and disobedient people.

The problem with the Israelites in the desert, with Nicodemus in Jesus' day, and with us in the Twenty-First century is not what we do but who we are. The problem is that we are who we are. We are men and women "turned into ourselves." We have tried forever to solve the

problem of sin by navel-gazing. We look deep within us trying hard to find a solution for the problem of sin. One of the things we do is that we minimize sin. We blame the problem on specific behaviors and so we say, "If only I could stop lying, I would be able to please God and obtain salvation... If only I could stop the evil thoughts flying through my head... If I could be more obedient to my parents... If I were less lazy in my acts of devotion..." Once we reduce sin to a specific behavior, we begin to look around or deep with us for the solution. This solution may be fasting, praying the rosary daily, doing three acts of charity every day, etc. In other words, we try to find human solutions for the human problem of sin. We are like people trying to find the cure for the itching caused by the snake bite, when the real problem is the poison running through our blood.

Let me be very clear: The problem is not our specific behaviors. If that was the problem, then the solution would be to stop the behavior. If the problem is over eating, then the solution would be to stop eating in excess. The real problem is the internal inclinations of our heart. The real problems is our brokenness. Sin is not something we do, but who we are. The problem with Nicodemus is that he has been navel-gazing all his life, and yet, salvation was not up to him, but up to the one hanging on the cross. There was nothing within Nicodemus that could save him from himself. Only God could do that! The solution was not self-improvement or more introspection. The solution was total dependency on God, as a new born baby is totally dependent on his loving mother. To solve the problem of sin Nicodemus must be born again!

My friends, the solution to our problem does not lie within ourselves and it does not lie in what surrounds us. There is nothing within ourselves or within our environment that could offer us the salvation we seek. The solution comes from outside us and from outside our immediate environment. The solution comes from the mountains. It comes from a young man dying on a cross. It comes from the one that has been lifted -up that all who believe in him might be saved. It is all about him and what he does for us.

Today I ask you to look at the cross of Christ and find healing and restoration there. But, I warn you, this is no cheap grace! When you look at that cross you will see a shining light that will reveal you to yourself. You will not be able to hide. All the corners of your soul will be flooded with light and you will see yourself as you are. The great news, however, is that the one who is dying on the cross for you will not be ashamed or appalled by what he sees. Just the opposite! He will remind you that he came into the world to save sinners! He will remind you that you are the one he came for. He then will invite you to abandon yourself into his loving arms. Let go and he will do the rest. He will cleanse you and redeem you. He will heal you and strengthen you. He will make you into a new creation. All you need to do is accept his love and his forgiveness in faith. He is the solution to the problem and he loves you in unimaginable ways. May he who died for us, continue to bless you. Amen!