

Lent 4, Year B, 031812
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Amen.

Good morning! I always like to start with a little liturgical education about where we are in the circle of the church year, and what, if anything, is special about a particular Sunday. Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent - more than halfway through the regular days of Lent, and just slightly more than halfway if you also count Holy Week. If we were a Roman Catholic church, we would be celebrating today as Laetare Sunday, *laetare* being the Latin word for *rejoice*. It is also known in other churches as Mothering Sunday, Refreshment Sunday, or Rose Sunday.

The point of all these names in one form or another is to give us a chance to 'lighten up' - to relax a bit - in the middle of our rigorous Lenten discipline. If we were a Roman church or a very high-church Episcopal or Anglican church, we might be using rose-colored vestments to symbolize the relaxation from the more serious purple. It is similar to Gaudete Sunday in Advent, when if one of the Advent wreath candles is pink, it is lit.

So there we have it.

And now, on to the lessons for today. In keeping with the idea of relaxing a little on this Sunday, let me remind you of what the Gospel of John brings us: (*Put on the rainbow wig and hold up the John 3:16 sign*).

Yes, it's that verse. John 3:16. You know it. It is probably the only verse that cradle Episcopalians can quote at all: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." And the reason you all know it is because of the guy who traveled around the country in this wig, sitting in the stands of football games and other sporting events, flashing this sign for the cameras - a symbol of born-again Christians.

(*Take off the wig.*)

But I'm ahead of myself.

At the beginning of our Gospel lesson today, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." But wait a minute, where did Nicodemus come from? Well, this is another case of the lectionary elves cutting up passages so that you don't always get the whole story.

If we had started at the beginning of chapter 3, we would have heard the familiar story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night to discuss with him the kingdom of God. And we would have heard again the famous line that Jesus says, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again." Another memory verse.

And because John 3:16 comes at the end of the Nicodemus story, it is easy for the born-again folks to remember that verse in conjunction with the first part. We have these 2 verses that we seem to remember as being right next to each other, but they are separated by almost a dozen verses in between, including the one about Moses and the serpent. And those lines? Not so familiar.

Now we're all familiar with the phrase about being born again, and for some of us, it has uncomfortable connotations with born-again Christians - you know, the ones who come up to you and ask if you've been saved, -- and if so, when, -- and if not, do you want to be, I've got the formula for you! But translation matters; many translators say that 'born again' should be instead '*born from above*' or '*born anew*', making for a completely different perspective on things.

And the translation again makes a difference in what we hear in verse 16: "God so loved the world." *SO* can be heard in terms of *degree*, as in 'I am *SO* over these politicians.' That means when we hear 'God so loved the world', we hear 'God loved the world a LOT.' But another meaning of the word *SO* is the idea of '*in this way*' or '*in this manner*.' Then we would hear, God so loved the world: '*God loved the world in this way*' or God so loved the world: '*God loved the world in this manner*.'

What John is talking about is the *way* God loved the world, and that brings us back to the serpent verse, so we'd better figure out what that is all about. In this part of the book of Numbers, the Israelites had been wandering around in the wilderness after their Exodus from Egypt. They'd been out there a long time, and they were getting tired and grumpy. So they complained about Moses and God, how the food was terrible (remember, it's all that weird manna that showed up in the

morning and then disappeared) and how they didn't have enough water. God was not thrilled.

So God sent poisonous snakes among them. The snakes bit them and they died. It's as if God said, 'You want something to complain about? I'll give you something to complain about!' And it worked. The Israelites began to realize that manna and not much to drink wasn't so bad after all. They stopped complaining and started praying for relief from the snakes. And God told Moses to make snake out of bronze and put it at the top of a pole. And whenever someone was bit by one of the snakes, if they looked at the snake on the pole, they would live.

It is this that the writer of John had in mind when writing his Gospel: in the same way that Moses lifted up a bronze serpent in the wilderness to cure people bitten by poisonous snakes, so God lifted up Jesus in order 'that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'

But the story doesn't end there.

Many years later, in the second book of Kings, we read that Hezekiah has just become the ruler of the southern kingdom of Judah. According to the writer of Kings, Hezekiah 'did what was right in the sight of the Lord.' Verse 4 of chapter 18 lists four specific things he did that made him right. He removed 'the high places,' he 'broke down the pillars,' and he 'cut down the sacred pole' - all things associated with worshipping gods other than Yahweh. But most important in our context is the fourth thing: he 'broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it.'

Apparently, the serpent on the pole had become a relic and was kept in the Temple, and over time, the people had begun to worship it as an idol. The bronze serpent, which had been built originally to remind the Israelites to trust God, to look to God for healing and salvation, to stop complaining about minor inconveniences and to be grateful for major events like freedom from oppression, had become an end in itself. The people of Judah were worshipping the snake instead of the God to whom the serpent pointed.

It no longer pointed beyond itself to God. Instead, it had become a formula: if you want to be healed, go pray to the serpent in the Temple. But God cannot be reduced to a formula.

Today, John 3:16 has become, for many Christians, the same sort of gimmick: read this verse, and you get saved. But God cannot be reduced to a formula, and the way of God, revealed in the life of Jesus, cannot be formulized either. And just as it was in Hezekiah's day, the idol of John 3:16 needs to be broken as well. Like the serpent in Hezekiah's day, John 3:16 by itself cannot heal or save us.

There's another danger in idolizing this verse: if we take it out of context we end up concentrating almost exclusively on Jesus' death, on Jesus being 'lifted up' on the cross. If this verse leads us to focus only on Jesus death, and thus to exclude patterning our lives after Jesus' life, then the verse has not only becomes an idol, it has become an end in itself and must be smashed as Hezekiah smashed the serpent in his day. It is not enough to admire Jesus' death but ignore his life.

So maybe we should look for another verse to flash at football games. How about one from the Hebrew Bible - Micah 6:8? "God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?" Or how about the Great Commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

They are not verses to which we give only lip service. But they will bring us healing if we live *in such a manner* every day. May we learn to love the world *in this way* - as God *so* loves the world.