

SERMON- Lent IV (B)

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Numbers 21:4-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

St. Timothy's Herndon

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Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

OPENING:

I can deliver, from memory, the entirety of the Gettysburg Address, I can do a couple of Shakespeare's soliloquys, and recite innumerable baseball and basketball statistics from decades past.

But the ONLY piece of Scripture that I have memorized (cold) is the tried and true verse from our Gospel reading- John 3.16:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

(And in the King James Version, to boot!)

I have my parents to thank for that one, having sent me to Vacation Bible School, at Culpeper **Baptist** Church, as a child, where we spent the week learning John 3.16. At Seminary, we actually did have to memorize a lengthy Biblical passage and deliver it in class one day. I spent hours memorizing it, and then delivered it to a group, then heard feedback on my performance and presumably was graded on it. But I have virtually no memory of what that text was, much less could recreate it here.

MEMORIZATION:

I know that's the way our minds work, things we learn by heart as children stick with us, whereas something from 5 years or 5 minutes ago... poof.... gone.

And I know that, back in the day, people memorized huge portions of Scripture, the whole Bible even.

I am also familiar with being stuck in a conversation with someone, and being overwhelmed by their command of the Bible and their ability to quote it.

Can you hear John 3.16 being quoted, maybe with a Southern accent, perhaps wielded as a weapon and source of condemnation...?

Then you wish that you had paid more attention back in Sunday School or in Bible class so you could come back at them more effectively.

Now, none of this is a criticism of the Episcopal Church— we read more Scripture, and a greater variety of Scripture, than most. The joke goes that we should be called the "Episcopal Bible Church" because, on most Sundays, we read an Old Testament lesson and a New Testament lesson, and a Psalm, and a Gospel reading, not to mention use a prayer book full of Scripture, and a hymnal rife with the same.

BIBLE

But I am not, generally-speaking, sure what the utility of memorizing Scripture is. Instead think of the harmful effects—

one scholar has written about today's religious landscape saying:

“We have a generation of Bible quoters, not a generation of Bible readers.”¹

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The tendency becomes to pluck out a text out of the Bible to support your point in a battle in the culture wars, or to make yourself feel better about a previously decided upon idea.

The Bible thus become a reference book or encyclopedia or “how to” manual.

Instead, in our tradition, we seek to read the Bible as a narrative.

As a story,

as a gigantic noisy conversation,

as a mansion with many rooms, with endless detours and highlights.²

I will venture that that is actually HARDER an effort than rote memorization

READING:

Take John chapter 3.

Verse 3.16 is the most quoted Scripture of all time—the one that you see on banners in between goalposts at football games and on coffee mugs and t-shirts.

The “gospel in a nutshell” it's been called and so it's worthy of memorization.

What in God's name, though, does it (quote on quote) “mean”?

More importantly, what is its role in that larger part of God's narrative, where does John 3.16 fit in God's story as told in the Bible?

To answer that, let's look at John 3.15 where we hear this weird thing about Moses putting a snake on a pole..... Huh?

John the Evangelist seems to expect his audience to understand that reference and, luckily, thanks to our Lectionary, we heard that very story earlier:

the story of the Israelites complaining in the wilderness and God sending a serpent. That story comes from the book of Numbers, which would not be high on anyone's list for memorization.

“Numbers” is so called because it lists all the tribes of Israel, in mind-numbing detail. When reading it, it's easy for your eyes to glaze over and to skip the genealogies and all that “begetting.”

But that's not what God does.

¹ Nienhuis, David R. 2018. *A Concise Guide to Reading the New Testament: a Canonical Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 4.

² N.T. Wright (Interview). “The Bible: Gospel, Guide, or Garbage?” *The Veritas Forum* (December 21, 2013) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTpgvI_vUjc

Instead... “God so loved the world that...” that he commissioned a book of numbered names to remember everyone in it.

Like a grandparent naming all their great grandchildren, or a child naming their toys or their pets, God’s love gushes forth in the naming.

Imagine God reading a phone book and rejoicing in all those names.

That’s the Book of Numbers.

I remember my Old Testament professor talking about Numbers saying:

“I am one of those people that always watch the credits of a movie all the way through to the end. Why? All those people’s names from Numbers—they were someone’s child and they deserve to be named.”

God lists all those names because “God so loved the world.”

Notice that it does not say “God so loved *heaven*, I hope you make it.”

It does not say “God so loved the *people that follow me*, they are better.”

It does not say “God so loved the world *as it might be* one day in the future.”³

It says: “God so loves the world,” the “whole wide world.”

SNAKE

Now God’s not naïve, God has numbered all of creation, and so God loves us in spite of who we are, rather than because we are “so” great. This is where Lent comes in.

The limits of our lovability, in fact, is right there in our Numbers reading.

Did you catch it? The Israelites pull off the ultimate 3 year old move when they ask:

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”⁴

Which one is it?

Was there NO food, or did you just not like what was on your plate?

These are God’s chosen people! And God SO loves them.

What happens next though is where the story gets weird, and it’s not very ‘memorable.’ It’s one of these stories that you just need to sit with and ponder, rather than quote rapid-fire at people to prove your point.

God sends a snake, an odd form of deliverance.

Then God says if you look at it, even if you get bitten, you will live.

Again, strange.

LENT:

But what a good story for us to hear during Lent.

In it, God commands them/us to look at the thing that is the result of their/our sin.

³ Keith Ward Sermon at *Virginia Theological Seminary* (4/26/2017)

⁴ Numbers 21.5

It is an invitation to reckoning, to step out of denial. Look at your faults, look at your shadows, look at your addiction, look at your sin. You have to look at the thing that will kill you, and that will bring you life.⁵

Now where have we heard that before?

In our Gospel, John the Evangelist takes this idea and says: Look up at Christ, Look up at the Cross, that's death, that's suffering, that's the worst possible outcome..... Or so you think.....

In our Lenten Journey, we start on Ash Wednesday and end up at Easter. We put ashes on our foreheads and say "Dust to Dust" and then end up at Easter and we look up to a reminder of our Baptism at the same place, resurrected into God's family.

CONCLUSION

Here's two final examples of this idea: one from outside and one from inside the church. Both point to the idea that the Bible lives and breathes; it does not sit there in stone, waiting to be memorized, but instead explodes off of the page, creating new worlds.

First example: you know how sometimes kids are scared of going to the hospital or to the doctor. There's the feeling that that's where sick people go. Some adults, I think, have this problem too. If you go to the hospital, then that would be admitting the reality that you would really rather not.

What's the symbol above countless hospitals and doctor's offices? It's a snake around a stick. The Caduceus—and it comes from our story.

You have to admit that you are hurting and face that snake, to take your medicine, to get healed and thus come out alive.

Final example: again this story with the snake is strange but, actually, we hear it every Sunday, in a way. Every time we celebrate communion, we reenact it. At the pivotal moment at the altar, I will do it here directly, the priest lifts up the elements, we elevate the bread and wine, and we say:

"These are the gifts of God, for the people of God."

Behold Jesus, the person that died, now brings us life. Can you bear to look?

It's the same dynamic as our story from Numbers.

"Behold the Lamb of God, the one who takes away the sin of the world."

We know that much, as Episcopalians, at least by heart.

Look at Jesus, his body broken for you, follow him to the grave and to death and, in doing so,... "you shall not perish but have everlasting life." **AMEN**

⁵ "Look at the Snake" (March 8, 2021) *Same Old Song* (Podcast, Episode 146) <https://thesameoldsong.fireside.fm/146?t=0>.