

May 30, 2021

John 3:13-17

“Now That’s Something to Look At! ”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The prophet Jeremiah writes: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it (17:9)?” Now, if we currently cannot fully understand what goes on in our own hearts, why would we ever think that we can somehow fully comprehend the Triune God. Moreover, Solomon writes in Proverbs 20:24, “A man’s steps are from the Lord; how then can man understand his way?” If we cannot understand the road in which we are currently traveling and what that road will bring tomorrow, what makes us think that we will be able to understand the Creator of the Universe and his ways?

Here we are! Another round of the Athanasian Creed! Another Trinity Sunday! After so many of them now behind us, have we gotten any closer to solving the mystery of how there is one God, yet three distinct persons, with each person being 100 percent, fully, undivided God? I think not! So, what would God have us do with this information? Why would God give us such a revelation of himself if it has absolutely no purpose?

I would suggest to you, as I have said in the past, that this teaching as been given to us for a very important and practical reason. Not only is this mystery designed to lead us into a deep contemplation and marveling at what is mysterious, but it has been revealed to lead us to look at what we desperately need to look at. It is taught so that we may know God sufficiently in order to see our rebellion against him and our need for salvation. It is taught so that we may receive that salvation and the great gifts that come with it. We need to know the true God, and so he must sufficiently reveal himself to us by giving us something to look at so that we may know and be saved.

Our lesson for today begins with these words from John 3:13, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” I would like for you to hear what Luther says about this verse. He writes:

We must learn this article of faith well and retain it, for very much depends on our knowing our Savior aright and clinging to Him in steadfast faith. Whoever passes that article of faith by, passes God by; but whoever discovers it, discovers God. Everything is concentrated in the Son, and outside the Son all is vain. Therefore this proclamation about the Son of God is no unimportant matter. It is ordained that we should seek nothing apart from the Son and that we shall find nothing apart from Him either in heaven or on earth. Without Him all is lost.

Those are strong words, and rightly so. The expression that the Son of Man “descended from heaven” tells us that God of very God was sent into the world by the Father and became Mary’s child. He became one of us. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and not only adopted our flesh, but descended into our death and tomb. He came to save deceitful, desperately sick hearts. He came to save our bodies since he became one of us and rose from the dead. He came to turn us around and put us on the road to heaven, which is the dwelling of our Good Creator, and thereby enjoy all that is good forever. He has descended into hell to proclaim victory over sin, death, and the devil. And he has ascended to rule all things for our salvation.

Human reason cannot fathom all of this. We must believe as Holy Scripture makes it plain. God even gives the gift of faith that we may passively receive him and his gifts. How is it that food and drink are transformed into flesh and blood? You may be able to explain to some degree the process, but you cannot fully know the how we have been enabled to do that. This does not stop you from eating! So we eat the truth that Jesus, true God and born of Mary is our Lord and has redeemed us lost and condemned creatures. And he who descended has ascended so that we may ascend with him and be with him forever. God gives us something to look at so that we may know him. He gives us his Son.

Luther wrote that John 3:14 was a familiar verse in his day. It was a text frequently treated in sermons and painted on walls of homes and stamped on coins. The verse states: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up ..." Luther said that these words "... are the greatest article of our Christian doctrine." Indeed! These words are about the article by which the church stands or falls - Justification, that we are declared righteous by grace through faith for the sake of Christ. Jesus takes our unrighteousness and gives us his righteousness. Jesus takes our uncleanness and declares us clean. Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness is about the Father sending his Son for all to look at and be saved.

We learn in Numbers 21:4-19 that the Israelites set out from Mount Hor by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. The people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit them, so that many Israelites died. 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. And 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 made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he or she would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Now That's Something to Look At! I think that what is most startling about this passage is that Jesus is the serpent on the pole. We all know what the serpent stands for in Scripture. From the serpent came sin, death, and hell. When the fiery serpents were biting the people, it was merely an outward manifestation of the spiritual truth about all of them. It is the spiritual truth about all of us. Having been bit by a fiery serpent, the venom of sin and death is coursing through our veins and we deserve nothing but the punishment of God. But Jesus became the snake. He takes the venom of sin and death by going to the pole of the cross. All who look at him receive forgiveness, life, and salvation. Peter writes in his first epistle (2:24): "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." And Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:21, "For our sake he [the Father] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Jesus was lifted up just like the snake for all to look at and live. **Now That's Something to Look At!** And when we look at that, we see the heart of God. In this serpent, God foreshadowed his one and only Son for the people of Israel and us. He was to assume the form of that which is cursed, a serpent, and become the Savior of the world. And that brings us to the familiar words of our day, "For God so loved

the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 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 (John 3:16-17).” Whoever beholds the serpent on the pole sees the love of the Father. Whoever believes that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in order to be lifted up for all to look at has been brought to love. The love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is identical, and we are to believe in that love. The Triune God is all about our salvation and speaks of that salvation with a love that saves and provides a road that leads to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - and to a forever, glorious future.

Indeed! The Triune God would have us to look at the snake on the pole - the snake who is Jesus of Nazareth the Son of God and Son of Man. He has rescued us from death and hell. Jesus is venom to death. He is the death of death. What a sight to see! And to look at him is to believe in him by the working of the Holy Spirit and to have the Father. Therefore, in the Triune God is new birth. Death and sin can no longer harm or injure us. We have eternal life. Therefore, as Luther exhorts:

Cling to His neck or to His garment; that is, believe that He became man and suffered for you. Cross yourself and say: “I am a Christian and will conquer.” And you will find that death is vanquished. In Acts 2:24 St. Peter says that death was not able to hold Christ, since deity and humanity were united in one Person. In the same way we, too, shall not remain in death; we shall destroy death, but only if we remain steadfast in faith and cling to death’s Destroyer.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott