

**Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Elizabeth Blunt Sermon Transcript**

John 3:16

Short:

What does the word “belief” mean in John 3, and what does it look like to bear this faith out into the world in this current moment?

Long:

In today’s sermon Mother Beth reflects on John 3, a chapter that is on view in tattoos and at football games, and is essentially a “central encapsulation of God’s good news.” This scripture actually has a lot to teach us about the continuum and complexity of belief –for Jesus, the disciples, the Hebrews and us. “Belief, as I read it here in John, is much like hope. It’s an innate willingness given us by God, to want what’s good, and to admit that we often fall short. If you add in a little bit of prayer, some worship, the nurture of community, its capacity becomes beyond our comprehension.” The readings are Numbers 21:4–9; Psalm 107:1–3, 17–22; Ephesians 2:1–10; and John 3:14–21.

Sermon Transcript:

May I speak to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

I’ve always have a hard time knowing whether those people who hold up signs at football games that say John 3:16 are more about trying to share the magnitude and the beauty of this central encapsulation of the Christian good news, God so loved the world, or whether they’re more about trying to compel a decision. More on the side of that whosoever believeth in him should not perish. Football fans or no, I think our scriptures collectively today leave us in the same bind, we’re caught between the comfort of the very best promises we have and some real existential anxiety. As a point of interest, the second half of that verse we all know so well, is probably better translated, that whosoever believeth should not perish, but have everlasting life in Him. Now, before you all decide that I’m about to jump off a heresy cliff, I have no intention this morning of telling you that belief, especially as we encounter it in the Gospel of John, over and over, is anything other than an essential response to Jesus, probably the essential response to Jesus. But I do think it’s worth pausing this morning to think about what that word means.

What it means here in John 3, and what it means for us as people who want to bear this faith out into the world in good conscience. The fourth gospel has a belief continuum. Just in the first three chapters we see it as a response three times. Nathaniel, one of the disciples says he believes after Jesus tells him he mystically foreknew him. But Jesus’ response to that is this, “Do you believe because I saw you under a fig tree, you will see greater things than this. Truly I tell you, you will see the heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” As the gospel goes on, we’ll meet people whose belief has more depth and maturity. But this is fledgling faith. All of these newly minted

disciples as a group, believe in Jesus after they witness the miracle at the Canaan wedding. But we know that their faith is going to go through a lot of expansions and contractions in the days ahead. Many people in Jerusalem in those early days, according to John, saw Jesus perform signs and believed something. But Jesus said, "A faith based on signs alone was insufficient." One of those Jerusalem observers was a Pharisee, in fact a member of the Sanhedrin and his name was Nicodemus.

Nicodemus came alone one night to question Jesus to try to reconcile everything he knew as a teacher of Israel with the things he'd recently seen and that's where we are today. John 3:16 lands right in the middle of an exchange between two experts in the law, in a debate really about rebirth and resurrection. We start with this seemingly out of place snake reference. And very helpfully, the locutionary this morning provides us the exact text that Jesus is referencing. He's taking Nicodemus back to Numbers 21. Numbers is an unfortunate way to refer to the fourth book of the Torah. In Hebrew, it's title is B'Midbar, which means in the wilderness. That's perfectly appropriate because that's what it is. It's a record of Israel's 40 years wandering in the desert between Egypt and the promised land. Forty years, I don't think we often stop and consider that. To walk straight from where Mount Sinai was to the cusp of Canaan should have only taken about three weeks. We encountered God's people this morning toward the end of that interminable period, nearly back where they started.

They've been forced to backtrack all the way South to the Gulf of Aqaba because Adam, the descendants of Esau, who are really their cousins, won't let them cut across their land. Now, I suspect that you and I can relate at this point in Lent and at our own historic moment to what Israel might have been feeling there at Mount Hor, traveling endlessly through an arid landscape with no destination in sight. Exhausted on the one hand by the monotony, and on the other by trials and terrors hemmed in on every side by enemies that were too strong for them. The soul of the people, Numbers says, became impatient because of the way. At different points in those 40 years of wandering Israel ran into some genuine crises, debilitating hunger and thirst, sicknesses, attacks. They cried out to God, and God was with them. God provided water from the rock, manna, and quail. But being that close to God's holiness was also dangerous. God had been increasingly angry, as the people's grievances had less to do with survival and more with resentment and despair. This complaint about the manna, this is the last complaint recorded in Numbers was by far the most offensive. Because it was laid not just against Moses, but directly against God.

God, the Bible says, and Rabbinic interpretations generally understand this as a test of faith, sent poisonous snakes among them. They immediately repented, and God immediately responded. He told Moses to fashion a serpent out of copper. Probably, the words serpent and copper in Hebrew are very similar. Then to mount it at the top of a wooden pole and anyone who then directed their gaze upwards toward it, was saved. Notice that in the Hebrew scriptures, the people are often described as one single organism. They have one heart and one soul, and so this people could make the claim as we hear it today in the Psalm, that despite their losses, they have been preserved, they've been rescued by God's mercy. Now, a plague of snakes is unfortunately not something that only happens by divine mandate in the deserts of the Middle East. There's a report written in the 1900s by T.E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, about an excursion he took in Jordan where he says, "The Valley seemed creeping with horned vipers, puff adders and cobras," like Raiders of the Lost Ark, just sounds terrible. I would say most present-day Americans have a pretty straightforward relationship with snakes. We don't like them much.

Some scientists think that response is hard wired into all primates because snakes had been one

of the only predators we've needed to fear consistently over time. But there are plenty of modern indigenous cultures with a more nuanced perspective. In the ancient world, worship of snake deities was common. Think of the headdress of the Egyptian Pharaohs, or of the ouroboros if you've seen that it's the serpent eating its own tail, that's kind of a symbol for eternity. Think of the moderns, symbol for medicine. It's the Rod of Asclepius. Snakes have of course been associated with death. But probably because they slough their skin periodically, they've also been associated with rebirth and with healing and fertility and wisdom. Even in our faith tradition, the resonance isn't one note that serpent in Eden was part of the creation that God called good. He was the wisest or the craftiest of all the creatures, but also at least partially responsible for humanity's expulsion from the garden. In the New Testament, Jesus tells his disciples as they go out into the world that they should be innocent as doves, but also wise as serpents. I think it helps if we bring all of that complexity into this comparison Jesus makes for Nicodemus. Because He's using the serpent, the symbol of the fall, as a key to understanding his own identity in life's work, it's pretty meta. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. The ramifications of this are totally fascinating.

In Numbers, the serpents sent by God were the problem, and the created image of a serpent was the solution. In John, the waywardness of man is the problem and Jesus, who is God's creative word in the image of man, is the solution. The serpent in Numbers healed the body of Israel, in John, the body of Christ is for the healing of the world, for the eradication of the disease of death. In saying he must be lifted up, Jesus is predicting His crucifixion. He's being lifted up on the wood of the cross. But He's also predicting His resurrection from the tomb and His ascent back to God. Jesus, as promised, is become the ladder erected to span the divide between heaven and earth. So, what is it to believe and receive all of this? If we look to Numbers, which is the key that Jesus provided for this early teaching on belief, what was required for healing was first confession and awareness of fault and of a need for divine help and then just a glance. All someone had to do to live was to point themselves toward the possibility of life. All they had to do was desire relief. The life of belief that Jesus describes in John Chapter 3, the life in the light is evident. Belief isn't just a private internal disposition or some prerecorded claim that we make, it's a concrete, observable affinity for truth, for goodness.

Beloved, if you've ever been morally conflicted, you have that. Likewise, the people who prefer darkness here aren't petty sinners. This isn't about the occasional complaint or inpatients or even blasphemy. These are people who actively prefer and pursue the big E evil and ally themselves with it. So belief, as I read it here in John, is much like hope. It's an innate willingness given us by God, not of our own merit, to want what's good, and to admit that we often fall short over a life in the hands of God belief like that seems like a tiny seed in shallow soil flourishes. If you add in a little bit of prayer, some worship, the nurture of community, its capacity becomes beyond our comprehension. God so loved the world that God gave Her only begotten child to be lifted up. Not a lifeless symbol, but rather a physician, a teacher, a friend reaching out to us actively in every season, persevering alongside us. This week, we enter into the latter half of Lent. In two Sundays, the space is going to be filled with palms and will stand at the edge of Holy Week and feel the simultaneous weight of our hope and our despair. It's tempting to think of this hour in-between time as a descent. But we're really already beginning to climb.

Amen.