

A Sermon  
"SIN COLORED GLASSES"  
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SCRIPTURE: **John** 3:14-21

And 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." 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 sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and **does** not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.

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CHILDREN'S SERMON

I brought something with me to worship this morning. I thought it was the safest thing I could bring. I brought a scissors. I want to talk about the **function** of a scissors, both its good qualities and its bad qualities. What are the good qualities of a scissor? You cut things. A seamstress uses a scissor. An artist often uses a scissor. Can you think of other people who might use them? A gardener. A barber uses scissors. School children use scissors. That's right. Surgeons use scissors. A cook might use a scissors. What would be some of the negative qualities of a scissor? **You** could cut yourself. They are pointed, they could hurt you. We could use them as a weapon, couldn't we? They could be very hurtful. There's a tendency to cut some things out of our lives that maybe we shouldn't cut out. Can you think of some other ways that we might use a scissors? I want to compare the scissors this morning to wisdom and knowledge, because that is part of what our story is about this morning as we listen to the Old Testament text in a few minutes and the New Testament text.

Wisdom and knowledge can both help us and harm us. We have to be the person who chooses. We have to be the person who uses knowledge in helpful and appropriate ways. There are all **kinds** of ways of contribution that people have made to the world with knowledge. They've been remarkably helpful. But we can also misuse it, can't we? And there are lots of things in our world that we have misused in terms of knowledge that have brought hurt and pain and sadness and destruction to each other as well.

It's hard sometimes to know the difference. I've been reading about the physicists who were working on the nuclear bomb program, both in this country and in Germany. There were a few of them who understood ~~the~~ magnitude of that knowledge – the remarkable power of being able to create a bomb that uses **fusion** or fission or whatever. It creates such incredible energy that it can be so destructive that it could destroy the whole world. Some of them knew the **harmful** potential of that and in Germany a couple of those physicists actually sabotaged the German project so it would have taken them longer to

develop it than it might have. A couple of the others defected and became part of the American project, the Manhattan project, to develop the nuclear bomb.

The reason I tell you this is because knowledge in and of itself and wisdom in and of itself isn't bad. Wisdom used at our hand sometimes can be incredibly destructive. It is just like this scissors. I can use it in all sorts of ways to do good. But I can also use it to hurt and to **harm**. Part of the role of religion, I think, our learning about God, is to teach us how to use the wisdom God gives us well.

So when you pick up your scissors, think about how you use them.

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### SERMON

I'm going to make you work a little this morning because the text, the John text, may well be the best known text of the Bible, especially John 3:16. How many of you memorized that in your life? "**For** God so loved the world ....okay? You bet, you memorized it. My pastor used to say, "If there was only one verse in all of the Bible that we could live with it would have to be John 3:16." In fact he said to me or to us, "If the only Gospel that we had was John, that would be enough"

For years, I thought that was the truth. And then I began to think about the Scripture as a whole body of literature that covers several thousand years in terms of its creation, its generation and its coming into being and I think we would be **bereft**, we would have lost a lot of what our understanding of the human **family's** struggle to recognize and to honor God would be if we didn't have the rest of it. I think we have to have history to understand what John was trying to say to us.

To interpret the text, John 14 through the end of the chapter, to interpret it well, it is essential that we revisit the First Testament story of Exodus as it is told in the Numbers passage that you read responsively this morning. John 3:14 wouldn't make a bit of sense without the Numbers story. We wouldn't be able to draw any conclusions or any understandings at all about what that stake was that was raised up in the desert that John talked about if we **didn't** have the Numbers story to inform us.

I think it's also important for us to look at the text in ways that allow us to recognize that the author of the story was trying to get a point across. There was some logic, some reason, not unlike us when we go back into our own history to draw connections and to make comparisons. We use metaphor and come to some kind of understanding. John was in that very mode when he was working – or the community of John as it is considered by some –when they were putting together the text.

So you don't read John 3:14-21 without looking at what came before it and what comes after it. The whole story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night was preceded by a remarkably important story in John. Do you remember what it was? (Sunday School Class, you can't answer). It was the throwing of the money changers out of the Temple. Now, why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus by night? Jesus wasn't a very popular guy right then! He'd made a mess of things and He had overturned everything that the

Pharisees believed and He had messed up Temple worship in the deepest, most **powerful** way.

It's interesting to note that in Matthew, Mark and Luke that story of the money changers isn't told at the beginning of Jesus' ministry like it is in John. It's told in the very last week of Jesus' ministry during Holy Week **after** the triumphal entry. So Matthew, Mark and Luke have a very different recollection, a very different memory of when these events took place in Jesus' life. I think John changes the story and there is a good reason why he changes the story because he is trying to build a case and he is trying to get the reader to understand the coming of Jesus within the context of Jewish history.

Now, we're going to go back 2000 years. We're going to go back to that story in Numbers. That story we have to put into context as well, don't we? The Hebrews had been in Egypt for some 430 years and Moses was selected to go back into Egypt and deliver, to call the people of Israel out of their kind of bondage to go back to the land that God had promised their father, Abraham. So Moses gathers up some 600,000 people and they begin a march from the land of **Goshen**, the fertile ground of the Nile, back into what is known today as the "Wilderness of Sin", a god-forsaken part of the country south of Israel itself, a remarkably desolate place.

They get there, they go through the Sea of Reeds, they go **through** the Red Sea as it were. They are out in the wilderness. Now 600,000 folk – **that's** a good sized town in America. They are hungry, they are dirty and they are thirsty. They say to Moses, "What are you doing to us? We left the pleasures of Egypt for this? (Remember, they were slaves in Egypt). We left the pleasures of Egypt for this? We're going to die of thirst." God says to Moses, "Moses, there's a rock over there. There's a cistern in that rock and if you speak to that rock, the water will come forth and everybody, even your livestock will be watered."

The people are groaning and moaning and resisting. So Moses in his anger goes up and he strikes the rock twice. **BANG, BANG!** And the water comes. It's **wonderful** and it's pure and it's clean and it's worthwhile and everybody is watered. God says to Moses, "This place is going to be called the Rock of Contention or Bitterness from this point because it was in the people's contention with God, their bitterness toward God that we did this thing."

That's the precursor to the story that Roger read for you about the snakes. The people hadn't changed their minds. They'd been watered but they weren't satisfied. They were still grumbling and complaining and worrying about their life and their provision. They were tired of the food already – manna **from** heaven.

So **the Scripture says that** God sent serpents (snakes) and **they bit them**. A number of people died. Of course, the Israelites were concerned about that so they went back to Moses and said, "What are you doing to us? Fix us! Fix some way." So God spoke to Moses again. He got a rod. (I thought about bringing one and wrapping a rubber snake

around it this morning but I didn't want to alarm or scare you.) If they could look at the pole and they could see the serpent, they wouldn't die.

That's the kind of story that movies are made from. But what is the underlying meaning? What can we learn from that story about ourselves and what was John trying to teach us in John 3? I really believe – I want to tease you with it and then back off and when I **finish** my sermon I'll try to put it into context again – I believe that our overwhelming tendency to resist change and struggle to escape the often terrifying unconscious forces within ourselves, put us off **from** our inner truth and the power of God that would liberate us into a vast new and **wonderful** future.

That is, it's **often** times easier to live in the bondage that we know, in the misery that exists, than it is to take the risk to change our lives and our world into something new. It's almost like wanting to live with the toothache because we're afraid of the dentist.

Why the snake? The snake has an interesting history in the Bible. In fact, it has a very interesting history in all of the ancient world. The snake is often associated with wisdom but it is most commonly representative of the world of instinct, especially those vital processes that are most psychologically inaccessible to us.

Snake dreams, for those of you who dream, indicate a discrepancy between the attitude of consciousness and instinct. The snake becomes a personification of the threatening aspects of that conflict of coming into consciousness. Now, think of that in terms of what Moses and God through Moses was trying to call the people of Israel in to being. They were living in a foreign land. (We often live in foreign lands psychologically where we don't understand, we don't recognize, we're not in touch with the forces that move us. We just react rather than pro-act. We're always trying to figure out what's going on rather than really sorting through and understanding the dynamics of our own lives.) Psychologically speaking, this story is the story of a whole people who come into a new level of consciousness. The snake, you see, is representative of that awakening consciousness and they are bitten by it and they are so scared of it that they die.

I believe there is another **frame** to think about the story. They were so angry and they were so bitter and they were so afraid of moving on that their fear consumed them and they could go no further. Have you ever been there? You were so **afraid** that you were actually immobilized.

I remember. I was sixteen years old and I was sitting at an intersection. One of the fellows who was on my paper route stepped off the curb in front of my car and was hit by a rubber tired earth moving machine. He was decapitated right in front of me – probably 30 feet **from** the front of my car. I was so scared I could not get out of the car to render aid. **Now**, he was dead. It was clear that he would not survive this incident. But I was terrorized by that event! I didn't know what to do. My stomach was in my throat. There were other people at that intersection who did render aid and they called the police and they did help. The fellow who was driving the payload was just in a puddle of emotion.

I remember all these things as if it happened yesterday. I remember that clutching fear that kept me **from** doing anything to help.

The wilderness might well be like that. Not having enough water or enough food might well be like that! It might render us completely immobile and unable to deal with those things that come before us.

For the ancients, the fear of going on could have been so great that they were consumed with bitterness and that bitterness was acted out toward Aaron and Moses. It was a bitterness that filled their lives with poison and brought about death.

In this context, I want to redefine sin. It seems to me that sin in this context is the refusal to accept God's provision and step into a new awareness of God's future. Sin is a state or a condition of frozen-ness – not so much a behavior – "You did BAD". But sin in this context is when we look on our own lives through 'sin-colored glasses' and we can only see with the eyes of fear and we resist and are poisoned by our inability to see God's provision – God's adequacy in all of our lives.

I think we as **a people** often look through 'sin-colored glasses', not because we do BAD, but because we are so immobilized by the fear of what tomorrow might look like that we stay stuck in the present. Sometimes we even want to go back. Give us the 'good old days of slavery, God, where I don't have to think, where I don't have to worry, where I know how much is coming to me. While it's not enough, I guess **I'll** be satisfied.'

The basic idea of the text is that the Son of Man who, in fact, has become the **Anointed One** sent as it were by God to bring healing to us, to become a salve, a coating **as** it were to encourage us to move on, to bring healing and wholeness to us, to act as that mediator between God's love and community. It seems to me that in our bitterness, in our sinfulness, that is, our looking through our own anxiety and our own fear, we are in danger of losing our connection to the Divine. When we resist God's call, we pay an **awful** price. When we look through 'sin-colored glasses' as it were, the glasses of immobilization, we miss the movement of God in our lives.

My hope is that we can begin to redefine sin, not as the good things or the bad things that we do, but **as** the condition that we are in when we are immobilized by our fear; and that we can take off those glasses and know for sure that this is God's Kingdom and we are in the midst of it. **WE ARE GOD'S PEOPLE** and we are living this day in the midst of the glory and the presence of God.

Let's take off our glasses and move into God's Promised Land. Amen.