

---

# Those Who Believe

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 10 March 2024

Numbers 21:4-9 • Ephesians 2:1-10 • John 3:14-21

---



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today's Gospel is one of the most well-known and important passages in the Bible, containing that verse so often quoted and referred to, John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him may not perish, but have eternal life." And we shouldn't forget the next verse: "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved." This is the essence of what we celebrate at Easter. God sent Jesus to save the world. And who is to be saved? Those who believe in Jesus. Those who put their faith in God. They will gain the benefit of Christ's dying on the cross, for by that action does Christ save *those who believe*.

I emphasise belief in Christ because it explains the beginning of the John passage, and the reading from the Book of Numbers which we've also heard

today, regarding the snake in the wilderness. A quick reading of the Numbers passage may leave you feeling a bit disturbed. In summary, God hears the Israelites grumbling about how they've been treated, and sends poisonous snakes to bite them and kill them. Then he causes a miracle to occur which allows many who have been bitten to be saved. It is this sort of passage which, unfortunately, leads many people to believe that the God of the Old Testament is a cruel God, delighting in vengeance. It is not uncommon to hear non-Christians say that they "cannot believe in a God who would do such 'cruel' things."

But are we, as humans, in a position to judge God? If we say God is "cruel", are we not judging by human standards? We then would be doing the same thing that the Israelites did when they complained about their treatment by God. "Did you bring us out of Egypt, just to let us die in the desert?" they cry. In other words, they are doubting God. They do not have faith in their Creator. They are judging God as they would judge another human being.

But God's wisdom is not our wisdom, and God's plans are not our plans. They are so much higher than our own wisdom and plans that we cannot comprehend it. We must remember that God sees all and knows all and has a plan for humanity. For us to judge any part of that plan is to doubt God, and it shows a lack of faith. When we say in the Creed that we believe in God the Father Almighty, and in his Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit, that is a confession of a complete faith in all of God's actions. God is always right and good and true. This is hard to take sometimes, especially in this age of personal justification, when individual human rights are talked about as the highest good and people have their own "truth." Acknowledging a higher truth, that is, God's truth, is not popular. But truly, God's truth is the only truth.

I want to be careful here. When I say we cannot judge God's actions, it does not mean that we should not try to understand them. God wants to be known by us, and willingly reveals himself in many ways. The fact that God is love is shown to us, by God, through many actions — the prime one being what we celebrate at Easter. But even in smaller episodes, such as the one about the poisonous snakes, God reveals love for us. For although God chastised and punished the Israelites for their lack of faith, God also relented and answered Moses' prayer on behalf of the people, giving them a bronze snake which saved many of them from death. Importantly, this occurs only after the people admit their guilt. They confess their sin through Moses: "It was wrong of us to insult you and the Lord," they say. God hears their confession, forgives them, and gives them the bronze snake to save them.

The entire journey through the wilderness, which takes up so much of the first five books of the Bible, is one long story of God's teaching the people to have

faith, through punishment and reward. The Old Testament contains many stories which show God's faithfulness and love, in spite of human faithlessness and disobedience. But the greatest example of God's love is still the incarnation of Jesus Christ and his willing acceptance of death to save us. It is unique because it is a human story as well as a divine story. We can understand Jesus' fear and reluctance to go to the cross, as well as his determination to serve his Father. These are human emotions which we can identify with. God's love of his only Son is also something that we as parents of children can understand. How Jesus' death removes our sin is a little more difficult — I don't think we'll fully understand that, this side of heaven. Believing it requires faith, and that is what God always asks of us, and in a sense, that is all that God asks of us: that we believe in God's goodness, love and faithfulness.

As we mark the events of Jesus' last week on earth, we can recognise both the human and the divine aspects of what happened. We can feel Jesus' anguish as he prays the night before, and his fatigue and agony as he carries the cross up the hill. We can feel the sorrow of Mary and the other women as they gather at the foot of the cross, and sense of hopelessness which the disciples feel after the crucifixion. And we look forward to the joy of the resurrection.

And through all of this, we know the love of our Creator, who made all this happen. It is all for us. And so we give thanks in this Lent and Easter season for the incredible, incomprehensible love which God shows us in giving his only Son, that through him we may have eternal life. Amen.