

## SERMON NOTES

Second Sunday After Christmas

### THE LOVE OF GOD

Synaxis Gospel  
John 3:13-21

#### INTRODUCTION

Our reading for today is repeated for the Feast of the Holy Cross in September. However, this is an important reading, for it not only summarizes the teaching of St. John in his Gospel, but it also encapsulates the purpose of God that the entire Holy Bible presents, from the first sentence of Genesis, in the Old Testament, to the last word of the final book of the New Testament, the Revelation of St. John. That purpose is our salvation wrought, by the all-embracing love of God.

In the reading, we find Jesus in serious discussion with one of the leading men of the nation. His name is Nicodemus. Nicodemus was one of the foremost teachers in the Jewish religion. He had carefully studied the Old Testament Scriptures, but he was full of questions. He was convinced that Jesus was a teacher sent from God, and could answer those questions. But, because most of the other men in his position were suspicious and antagonistic toward Jesus, Nicodemus did not want them to find out that he had consulted with Jesus. So, Nicodemus had arranged to meet Jesus at night.

The pressing question Nicodemus had was about the Kingdom of God. He wanted in. But how does one become a citizen of God's Kingdom? That was the big question in the mind of this man, famous for his ability to teach religion. He knew in his heart that his high position in his religion did not get him through the door of the kingdom. He had been through all the ceremonies and faithfully kept all the traditions, yet Nicodemus knew he was not in. He was not in the kingdom of God. He was desperate, so he went to see Jesus, by night.

Jesus, to Whom all hearts are an open book, skipped the pleasantries and went straight to the unspoken question. How does one enter God's kingdom? It is a matter of birth. There are two kinds of births. One is physical, from the watery confines of the mother's womb. The other is spiritual, the mysterious invisible product of the Holy Spirit of God. <sup>1</sup>Nicodemus still did not understand the process and Jesus takes a moment to let him know that even though the powerful group, of which Nicodemus was a member, did not believe Jesus' message, Nicodemus had indeed come to the right Person.

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<sup>1</sup> The kingdom's citizens are not simply spiritual beings or simply members of the human race; they must be both, as is their King.

## SYNTAXIS READING

John 3:13-21

*“And no one has ascended into Heaven, but He who descended from Heaven, even, the Son of Man.*

*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.*

*For God so loved the world, that He gave His<sup>2</sup> only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.*

*For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him.*

*He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*

*And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world,*

*And men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light, lest his deeds should be exposed.*

*But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.”*

## NOTES

**“And no one has ascended into Heaven, but He who descended from Heaven, *even*, the Son of Man.**

Since no one can travel to heaven, the only Person that can answer questions concerning the Kingdom, is the King from heaven. This statement is an allusion to the Old Testament vision in the book of Daniel.<sup>3</sup> In the vision, Daniel saw a ceremony before the throne of God in Heaven. He saw “One like a Son of Man” being given the dominion of the Kingdom.

This title, Son of Man, alluding to the vision, was the title Jesus most often used for Himself. Everyone, who heard Him do that, understood exactly that He was claiming to be the King of Daniel’s vision.

Other titles that mean ‘the King’ are: ‘the Christ,’ ‘the Messiah’, and ‘the Son of God’.

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<sup>2</sup>The best manuscripts do not have ‘His’ but have ‘the’: “the only begotten (or unique, only one of kind) Son.” The term ‘only begotten’ Son is used again in a following verse with the same meaning.

<sup>3</sup> Dan.7:13-14

## And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,

Jesus now answered the ‘how’ question. How does one get the second birth required for citizenship in the Kingdom? Jesus illustrated the answer with an Old Testament story that Nicodemus would know very well.<sup>4</sup> Fourteen hundred years earlier, as Moses was leading the Jews’ ancestors through the desert to the Promised Land,<sup>5</sup> they became rebellious, ungrateful, and disobedient. God punished them by sending deadly serpents that bit them.

However, God also provided a cure, a relief from the sentence of disobedience: the cure required belief and obedience. He instructed Moses to make and place a brazen serpent on a pole, and lift it up so that the people could see it. He then told Moses to command the people to look toward that lifted up figure of the serpent.<sup>6</sup> If they trusted God’s word and obeyed, they would recover from the snake bites. If they did not trust and obey, they died.

## even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

“Even so,” refers to the lifting up of the brazen serpent. Just as it was lifted up on a pole for the purpose of salvation from the snakebites, so Christ would be lifted up, but on a cross, for the salvation from the penalty of all human disobedience to God. “Lifted up” was an expression that the Jews understood referred to crucifixion.

### THE FACT

Mankind was spiritually dead, but God would act. This crucifixion was a must. Jesus, the Son of Man, would be crucified—lifted up on the Cross. From the days of Adam and Eve until today, the penalty for the sin of disobedience—because of disbelief in the truth of God’s statements and distrust in the goodness of God—has always been spiritual death. But God has provided a cure: Christ’s death for us on the Cross.

## that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.

### GOD’S PURPOSE

God’s purpose was to restore life for all who trustingly believe that God has made this provision; for all who trustingly believe that God has told us the truth about this matter. To all who believe this and therefore trust God in this matter, God promises eternal life. Eternal Life is equivalent to the spiritual birth required to be a citizen of the Kingdom. The life is “in Him” that is, the believer comes to be in Christ’s Body, attached by the act of trusting Him.

## For God so loved the world,

### THE REASON

The reason God took this action, and made this sin curing provision, was because He deeply loves all mankind.

## that He gave His<sup>7</sup> only-begotten Son

For the purpose of the cure, Jesus Christ was sent to be lifted up on the Cross.

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<sup>4</sup> Numbers 21:5-9

<sup>5</sup> The land that God had earlier promised to give to the Patriarchs of the Jews, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is the present land of Israel. However, their possession of the land was always contingent on their faithfulness to God. Their present day rejection of their God given king, Jesus Christ, places them in a state of unfaithfulness.

<sup>6</sup> The Israelites kept the Brazen Serpent, probably as a reminder of their sin and God’s provision in their time of desperate need. Hundreds of years later, idolatry had crept into the pure religion. The people were worshipping many idols, including the Brazen Serpent. A godly king destroyed the Brazen Serpent, along with the other idols [2 Kings 18:4]. As for us, we always stress that it was Christ Who saved us by His death. The Cross represents that powerful fact for us. We call it ‘Holy’ because it was used for that holy purpose; but it is Christ we worship.

<sup>7</sup>See note 2.

Nicodemus and the Jews of Jesus' day would have understood the title, 'Son of God', as referring to a kingly ruler - someone ruling as God's vicar on Earth. God named Adam as the first ruler of the earth. In recognition of that fact, Luke 3:38 names Adam "The Son of God." Psalm 2 was read, with hope, at the coronation of each new king of Judah, beginning with Solomon<sup>8</sup>. It pictures the new king as reigning with all the glory and power of God over all peoples. All of their kings fell short of that hope, but the Jews knew that, one day, a King would arise who would fulfill the Psalm.<sup>9</sup>

The term 'only-begotten' has its roots in Psalm 2 as well. Concerning the new King, God is quoted as proclaiming: "You are My Son. Today I have begotten You." So the 'begotten son' metaphor was used of all the kings. However, the term, "only begotten Son" speaks of a King who was unique from all the rest. Today we know that Jesus was the unique Son of God, because He is God incarnated. Therefore, in Jesus Christ, Psalm 2 is completely fulfilled.

**that whoever believes in Him should not perish as, but have eternal life.**

Anyone has the opportunity, but that person must believe that Jesus Christ is God's provision against the death sentence for our sins that we would face without Him. This is not simply an intellectual assent. Even the demons "believe [that God is One] and shudder."<sup>10</sup> Our belief must be one of trust in Him, a child totally trusts its father to do what he promises.

**For God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world,**

When Christ returns to the Earth, He will judge the world. But at the First Advent, He had a different purpose, salvation.

**but that the world should be saved through Him.**

God's salvation purpose, the opportunity He graciously extends to all members - past, present and future - of the human race, rested on the shoulders of the King, Jesus Christ. He died for each and every one of us.

**He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe is judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten<sup>11</sup> Son of God.**

Believing is the key to appropriating God's offer. In the story of Moses and the serpents, the people were bitten and were dying. If they did not act as God instructed they would remain in their condition, and die as a result of the judgment that the snakes fulfilled. But if they believed and obeyed—looked at the Brazen Serpent—they would be freed from the judgment (the condemnation) and they would live.

Just as in the story of Moses and the serpents, we, too, must believe that God has truly provided a cure for the certain death position we are in. And acting on that belief, in trust, will deliver us. On the other hand, disbelief leaves us in the position of condemnation for our sins, the result of which is spiritual death.

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<sup>8</sup> Actually, Solomon, King David's son, was the last king to reign over the undivided kingdom that was later split into the kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the place of Psalm 2 in the life of Israel see Leopold Sabourin, *The Psalms, Their Origin and Meaning*, (New York: Alba House, 1974) pp.338-42.

<sup>10</sup> James 2:19

<sup>11</sup> See note 2 for 'only begotten'. son, was the last king to reign over the undivided kingdom that was later split into the kingdoms of Judah a

The term 'name' in the Bible refers to more than simply a name; it refers even more to the character of the one who has the name – to who that person really is. So here, 'name of the only begotten Son of God' does not refer simply to the name 'Jesus', but to the character of Jesus, who Jesus really is: the unique Son of God, the King, Who is the loving and truthful incarnate God.

**And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world,**

What distinguishes the judged from those who escape judgment is their reaction to Jesus Christ, the Light of the world.<sup>12</sup> (Light is descriptive of God, because without it there is no life, and because in the presence of light, truth is revealed. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."<sup>13</sup>)

**and men loved the darkness rather than the light for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.**

People, who want to cling to, or even deny the fact of their sinful ways, try to hide from Jesus Christ. In His Holy Presence their sins are fully and shamefully exposed. Such people prefer their sins to a loving relationship to God.

**But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.**

One, who believes and trusts God and obeys the commandments of God, loves the Light and its revelation. In His bright Presence, it will be known that their good deeds were actually the results of God's power working in and through them.<sup>14</sup> The fact that their works are actually God's works proves that they are citizens of God's Kingdom.<sup>15</sup>

## APPLICATION

Nicodemus was one of the most religious men of his day; he was even called *the* teacher of Israel. Yet, he knew, deep within his soul, that his relationship with God was not right. Many people are able to teach others or recite creeds, but they still do not, in their heart of hearts, believe that what God has promised, He will faithfully carry out. If we only believe, as the demons do, that God exists, we will only be terrified to face Him, just as the demons are. This is not what God wants from *us*. What God requires of us is to believe Him—to believe that all that He says is *true*. He wants us to believe that He loves us and He wants us to trust Him. He is not out to *get* us, on the contrary, He is out to *save* us and restore us to Himself.

The Synaxis reading from the Old Testament is often skipped and, consequently, many people have the idea that only the New Testament is important for Christians. This is a great mistake. For it is from the Old Testament, particularly the book of Genesis, that we learn why we need a Savior. We learn that God loves us, because we were made in His own image, to be with Him, and rule for Him. We learn how mankind, in the persons of Adam and Eve, betrayed God's love by doubting His goodness and believing Satan's lie

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<sup>12</sup> For this concept see also John 1:4-9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46

<sup>13</sup> John 14:6

<sup>14</sup> "For it is God Who is at work within you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" Philippians. 2:13.

<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 2:4-10

rather than God's truth. We learn that this action, on mankind's part, resulted in spiritual separation from the God Who loves us, and it cast us under the penalty of eternal death as judgment for our sins. Every human being, since Adam and Eve (with the exception of Jesus Christ), has essentially repeated the sin of the first humans, with the result that we find ourselves under the same judgment.

However, the book of Genesis also reports that God resolved to restore His lost humans to Himself by taking the penalty for their sins Himself. To do this, He planned to become a human being in order to die as their substitute to justice. That He would do this is first promised in the third chapter of Genesis,<sup>16</sup> and is repeated and developed in the prophets,<sup>17</sup> and was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, as the New Testament so fully records.

Nicodemus knew the promises of God from his study of the Old Testament. Those promises were being fulfilled as they spoke. Jesus is the promised King, the unique Son of God, who brought salvation to all who trust in the truth of God's word. Within a short time of their conversation, Jesus, God in human flesh, paid the sin penalty for us all; all we need to do is trustingly believe that He did. Nicodemus wanted to know how he could be born spiritually. Jesus gave him the answer: believe in Him; look only to Him for salvation. That is the answer he gives us as well.

The last information we have about Nicodemus is recorded in John 19:38-42. Despite the fact that their actions would mean certain loss of their powerful positions and even excommunication from their people, Nicodemus and another secret disciple allowed their devotion to Jesus to be openly known. After the crucifixion, they went to the Romans and requested from them the body of Jesus, which they lovingly buried. Nicodemus gave up everything for the love of the Christ, Who died for him.

May we be truly thankful to God for the salvation He has provided for us at such great cost to Himself. May we, like Nicodemus of old, respond in total love and in absolute trust, to our glorious Savior. To do so is to receive Life for ever and ever in the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>16</sup> Genesis 3:15 is called the 'proto-evangelium' (the first Gospel or first Good News) because God promised that the Seed of the Woman would crush the serpent's head, although that promised Man would suffer from its deadly bite.

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 53 clearly predicts the Savior's substitutionary death for sinners.