Reflection for the Second Sunday in Lent-March 1, 2026
by Jennifer Irving

I have always struggled with our gospel reading for this morning. The one that contains what is arguably the most famous verse in the New Testament, John 3:16, a citation frequently seen on placards at sporting events and other public gatherings (most notably for me outside of the General Council meeting I attended when I was Neelah's age in Fredericton, New Brunswick), on bumper stickers or even in graffiti along roadsides, and so on. The verse Martin Luther called "The Gospel in miniature" – arguing that everything we need to know about the good news is summarized in that one verse. And yet, this is also the verse that has been used as a proclamation of contempt and exclusion—turning it into the anti-gospel and a very powerful "clobber verse". Hence my struggle and my plan to preach this Sunday solely on our passage from Genesis about Abram and Sarai and their bravery to leave what they know behind and venture out into an unknown future like we discussed in our bible study this week. At the most, I would include Nicodemus as an example of someone else called by God to do something that would take bravery and courage. (For an example of what that sermon might have looked like, please see my Lent II reflection from three years ago!)

Yet, as I was preparing for this Sunday, I received my weekly email from saltproject.org I don't always read the commentary that is linked in this email—(each week also contains a link to a poem—that's what I really love to read)—but this week, I did. And I hope you will entertain me this week because most of what I want to talk about is taken from this commentary—in the hopes that we all might better understand John 3:16 and in the hopes that we might redeem this passage to be the good news, the gospel, it was meant to be. I hope you will not find it boring—I know I didn't!

At Saltproject.org they argued that "this verse presents us with an excellent opportunity to clarify how we conceive God's love and justice, and what Christian good news is really all about." and I've got to tell you, I feel like this is exactly what we need.

So first, they comment on a couple of things from the "bigger picture" of scripture and tradition that help us in understanding and interpreting this scripture passage from John.

The first is the nearly a dozen in Exodus and Numbers describing the people of God complaining or rebelling along the way.

> … in this week's passage from John, Jesus alludes to the very last of these stories. It's arguably the most serious of them all, since the people speak "against God and against Moses," a formulation unique to this story (Num 21:5). Hungry and impatient, the Israelites ungratefully describe the exodus from Egypt as "bringing us out into the wilderness to die," and so God sends poisonous, deadly serpents to slither among them, wreaking havoc (Num 21:5-6). The people confess ("we have sinned") and plead for help, and God directs Moses to fashion a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole, such that any bitten Israelite can "look at the serpent of bronze and live" (Num 21:7-9).
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> [of note] Both in Numbers and in John, there are indications that the negative consequences described in these stories are less divine punishments and more aspects of the self-destructive nature of sin itself.
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> In Numbers, the Israelites' complaints are themselves conspicuously "serpentine": poisonous, bitter, and self-contradictory (given manna to eat daily, the people say both "there is no food" and "we detest this miserable food" (Num 21:5)).
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> And in John, Jesus casts those who do not believe in him as condemned "already" as a result of their desire to stay in the shadows; in this sense, they condemn themselves by choosing to avoid the light (John 3:18,21).

> In any case, the center of gravity in both stories — and the key link between them — is the saving action of God, as well as God's intention to save not just a select few but rather "everyone" who looks upon the bronze serpent (Numbers), and indeed the entire "world" (John).
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> Jesus' other allusion in this passage from John — by way of the phrase, "gave his only Son" — is to the harrowing story of Abraham and Isaac, in which God calls on Abraham to give his "only son" as a burnt offering (John 3:16; Gen 22:2,12,16). As it turns out, the instruction is a divine "test" to see whether Abraham's fidelity and devotion to God are genuine or driven by self-interest (Gen 22:1). Abraham loves Isaac, of course, and in addition, since Isaac is Abraham's only heir, his death would invalidate God's promise that Abraham's descendants will be "a great nation" (Gen 12:2; 15:3-6). God is asking, in effect, *Are you truly devoted to me — or merely to the promise of a great legacy?* Thus the instruction to sacrifice Isaac "tests" whether Abraham's devotion is a disguised transaction with strings attached — and indeed, in the end, the ordeal reveals that his devotion is extravagant and true. By alluding to this story, Jesus is signaling that God's devotion to humankind is likewise extravagant and true (no strings!), and that Jesus' mission — his life, death, and resurrection — should be understood accordingly.

Having set up these allusions within this particular scripture passage to these other bible stories that Nicodemus and early Christians hearing this gospel would be familiar with and that would help them understand this scripture more fully, saltproject.org goes on to get into the particulars of understanding this passage and argue why it has been so misunderstood and misused in the past.

First they explain that in this "late-night, clandestine conversation, Jesus' words are part of an attempt to persuasively explain his identity and mission to an interested, well-educated Jewish leader who has asked to hear more."

They explain how Jesus' allusions to the Israelites in the wilderness and to Abraham and Isaac ("gave his only Son"; John 3:16; Genesis 22) are both tailor-made for Nicodemus, "a Pharisee who would have known scripture exceedingly well"

Then they do some biblical criticism that I cannot believe that this was something I had never heard before that helps turn this passage into Good News for all. They say:

> In seventeenth-century English, "so" frequently meant "in this way" — as in, "like so," or "so help me God." Accordingly, in the King James Version of the Bible, it made perfect sense to translate the Greek *houtos* ("in this way") with the English word "so" — and that's exactly what the KJV translators did in the famous sentence, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." (John 3:16).
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> But today, we more often use "so" to mean "very" or "to a large extent" — as in, "I'm so sad," or "She's so smart!" Thus John 3:16 is often misunderstood today as a statement about the extent or degree of God's love — whereas actually it's a statement about the way or pattern of God's love, as in, "For God loved the world in this way: he gave his only Son…"
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> Remember, Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, a student of scripture, and in order to describe the character of God's love, he makes two allusions to ancient scriptural archetypes: one underscoring God's desire to save sinners (the story of the bronze serpent in the wilderness); and the other underscoring God's extravagant fidelity and devotion to humankind ("gave his only Son" — in this sense, in Abraham's extravagant devotion to God we can catch a glimpse of God's extravagant devotion to us). In what way does God love the world? In this way (*houtos*): God graciously delivers us from the self-destruction of sin, and God faithfully, astonishingly gives God's only Child for the sake of our deliverance, such that we can "look at" Jesus life, death, and resurrection in ways that help us heal and live. The cross, Jesus suggests, poetically proclaims these astounding ideas.

Now, like me if you are wondering about the problem of who gets saved—because that is the root of the real problem with this passage isn't it? That only those who believe are granted "eternal life". The saltproject.org reminds us that is only the case if "the situation boils down to a transaction: *if you believe, you'll have eternal life.* But there are many reasons to think otherwise."

> First, throughout John's Gospel, "the world" (Greek: *kosmos*) is a term typically used as shorthand for sin or estrangement from God — and this makes it all the more striking that Jesus says, "God loved the world" (*kosmos*) and not "God hates the world, but loves the remnant of those who believe."
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> Second, in Numbers, when God provides the remedy of the bronze serpent, the strategy isn't to save a few well-deserving Israelites with the proper set of opinions or dispositions, but rather to save "everyone" who had turned against God and then (for arguably less-than-noble reasons) sought deliverance (Num 21:8).
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> Likewise, third, the story of Abraham and Isaac is precisely a rejection of transactional forms of devotion: Abraham passes the "test" by showing that his devotion to God is *not* transactional, and so the analogy suggests that God's love isn't transactional, either (no strings attached!).
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> Fourth, in the very next verse Jesus underlines that God sends the Son not "to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17).
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> And finally, while "believing in Jesus" is important in this passage, who's to say what does and doesn't qualify — from God's perspective — as "believing"; whether such belief can emerge after death; whether God also has other ways to redeem human communities; whether divine forgiveness might be extended to everyone in any case; and so on? Who's to say, in other words, that God won't find a way after all to save "the world" God loves?

And just in case you think I've forgotten all about the passage from Genesis for this morning, it also affirms the universality of God's grace and mercy because God's promise to bless Abram isn't for his sake alone, or even for his descendents alone — it's ultimately for everyone: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3).

In short, God loves "in this way" (*houtos*): graciously, mercifully, faithfully, devotedly — and, at least in my humble opinion, universally, for the sake of "the world" (*kosmos*). Thanks be to God! Amen.

Now let us sing a song that has been sung throughout the ages proclaiming this very grace, mercy, faithfulness and devotedness of our God as penned by the Psalmist found on page 842 of Voices United.