

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

By the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, Founder of Crossways International
(Sola Publishing, Edited Version © 2023 H. Wendt)



Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

John 3:14-21

Year B - Lent 4, Text: John 3:14-21
Year B - Lent 4, Text: John 3:14-21

In John 2:13–25, the section leading up to today’s pericope, we read of Jesus going to Jerusalem “when the Passover of the Jews was near” (2:13). During His time there, Jesus attacked the Temple’s “sin management system” and its “salvation marketing system.” John 2:23 says, “When he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.”

This leads to Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus in John, chapter 3. It is likely that Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish council or Sanhedrin in Jerusalem (see 7:50).

Embedded in within his meeting with Jesus is the first of the Johannine discourses. Its contents shift from dialog (3:1–10) to monologue (3:11–15) to reflection by the evangelist (3:16–21). The shift from singular in Verses 1–10 to plural in v. 11 may reflect the early church’s controversy with the Jewish leaders and people.

Commentary

Verses 3:14–15: Jesus’ first passion prediction in John is recorded in 3:14. John makes reference to Moses’ bronze serpent as an example of healing and restoration to wholeness coming through something “raised up” (Numbers 21:9). However, Moses simply mounted a serpent on a pole — a symbol that people were to look up to. Here, John substitutes a verb that implies glorification.

Jesus, exalted to glory at His cross and resurrection, represents ultimate healing and restoration to wholeness for all who look up to Him. Just as those who looked up at the bronze serpent would be healed of the snakebite that they had suffered because they had worshiped false gods. Similarly, those afflicted by the “bite” of Satan, sin, and death are healed by looking on the One who has been lifted up on a cross.

Verses 3:16–17: Martin Luther referred to John 3:16 as the Gospel in a Nutshell. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Most interpreters take this as a quote from Jesus, rather than a comment by the evangelist, the original Greek has no punctuation to make this clear. In any case, the dialogue has now become a monologue. (Nicodemus possibly slipped off into the night from which he had come, his eyes open later; see 19:38, 42.)

The focus is on the significance of Jesus’ incarnation. To say that God “gave” implies that he *gave up to death* or *sacrificed* His only Son to gain this new life for humanity. The mission of Jesus is not about condemnation, but salvation.

Verses 3:18–21: Those who believe in and follow Jesus face no condemnation. Those who do not believe in and follow Him do face condemnation (Verses 17–18). Indeed, free grace invariably calls people to costly discipleship.

Tragically, humanity by nature chooses the darkness of sin and living for self rather than the light of God’s truth — demonstrated in the mission and ministry of Jesus (Verses 19–20). Jesus’ desire is not merely to “dry-clean” us from sin, but to disciple us so that we follow Him in compassionate servanthood on a world-wide scale. And those who walk in the ways of Jesus have no cause for boasting; their deeds have been done in God (v. 21).

