

“Whoever Believes”
Pastor John Bronson

(John 3:13-21)

November 6, 2011

Order of Worship for November 6, 2011, Communion Service
Pre-service Song
Welcome and Announcements

Ministry Moment: (We need to plan some sort of recognition of Veterans’ Day. Is Ruth Bowen covering this? Will it include any special music or a selected patriotic hymn?)

Call to Worship: Psalm 20:1-9 and Prayer

Songs of Worship:

“God of our Fathers”

Song # 809

“Heal Our Land”

Song # 800

“We All Bow Down”

Overhead

Offering and Offertory

The Lord’s Supper:

Preparing our hearts in song: “How Deep the Father’s Love”

Overhead

Invitation and prayers of confession and consecration

Distribution of the elements

Response in song: “You are my All in All”

Song # 583

Message: “Whoever Believes” (John 3:13-3:21)
by Pastor Bronson

Closing Song: “Behold What Manner of Love” Song # 708

Parting Word of Grace

Sunday Evening in the Word
Cancelled for this evening

Study of Hebrews 13 will continue next week,
5:30-7:00 pm. in the Henneker Music Building

“The Prayer Closet”

November 6, 2011

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

1. **Steve and Carol Lyons in Tanzania:** many students will commit to the discipling program in addition to the Teacher Training Religion class; the Spirit will prompt the older students to disciple the younger; the Lord will provide time, mental energy and love for disciplined schedules
2. **President Obama:** the Lord will lead him to put governing ahead of campaigning; the Spirit will open his eyes to his spiritual needs; the Father will preserve him and his family from danger and deception
3. **The Board of Elders:** they will be united in prayer to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; the Lord will instruct them in the way forward for our church ministries; the Spirit will impart wisdom for the church budget for 2012 especially for blessing our community
4. **Military or Public Service Personnel of the week: SPC National Guard, Casey Brubaker** (Son of John and grandson of Larry and Wanda Brubaker): currently in Iraq, please pray for continued safety, Christian fellowship and for clarity in regards to his training and orders
5. **Military Praise!!:** Pete Gibson put on Master Sergeant stripes November 1 while on TDY in Guam!
6. **Young Adult of the Week: Bethany Sweetman at Butte College** (daughter of Catherine Sweetman): that she will be able to experience success in her studies as a pharmacy tech. student as well as maintain her classes at Butte College

Today we are going to be looking at “Whoever Believes” and the text is John 3:13-21. We will get to that in a moment. I want to make some preliminary comments. We will drop back with verse 13, not starting with v. 16. Two weeks ago when I was last here we read through the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, which is what occupies the section before today’s text. It was in the context of that conversation that we learn of the need to be born again by the Holy Spirit. Most of us are familiar with the fact we need to be born of the Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God. We understand that. But here Jesus makes the comment that you need to be born again even to see the kingdom. If we consider that, we recognize that is a knowledge issue. To not be able to see is in effect to be blind. To be blind is to not know. That is the gist, if you follow through and indeed, in terms of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus. The consequence, in talking with Nicodemus, who is a Pharisee and knows the Bible backwards and forwards and would embarrass most of us as to the extent and quality of his knowledge, and is presented in the passage as and thought of himself as the teacher of Israel, so the teacher of Israel is blind and ignorant. Those are heavy considerations.

[John] concluded, if you look in John 3, his report of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus in verses 13-15 (please look to those verses at this point): this is how he concludes the conversation [with Nicodemus] who came to Jesus in the night and said, “We know that God is with you because nobody can do the things you do and not have God with them. Jesus says this to him, *“No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.”* Remember that when we read these verses you need, the first thing you need to do is to say to yourself, “Jesus has not yet died on the cross and been raised from the dead.” You know that [will be true], I know that, but Nicodemus did not know that. It hadn’t happened yet. So if you are going to understand what is being said to us in its context, its first context, you have to step back and ask, “What would this mean if you didn’t know that Jesus was going to die on the cross and rise again?” That is what we are going to do first of all in looking at this.

As you would listen to this, even not knowing about the fulfillment of the Gospel promise, Jesus is making two remarkable claims in these verses that we want to pay attention to. The first is his saying, “I have a remarkable access to the truth;” and the second thing he is saying is this: “I myself will become the object in which you must believe, I myself.” As regards the latter, for Nicodemus to understand and accept this would not require that he understood the need for Jesus’ death and resurrection, for that has not happened, it hasn’t become clear yet. He would have known about the episode recorded by Moses in the Book of Numbers. That is the one talking about lifting the serpent up. It was during the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel when the tribes were plagued by a terrible infestation of serpents and the people were dying. Responding to Moses’ prayer the Lord instructed Moses to fashion a bronze snake, a serpent, like the serpents that were killing off the Israelites. He was to put it in a place where anyone who was bitten could see it, and when they were bitten they looked at it and they were cured.

As regards looking to or having faith in Jesus for eternal life, Nicodemus would most likely have thought in terms of Jesus functioning as a prophet – he knew he was a prophet – he would not imagine him dying for people, but he could imagine him giving them a body of instruction, a new teaching, and that this new teaching would somehow fulfill aspects of the Word of God and would itself become the key to eternal life. That [Nicodemus] could have certainly understood and wouldn’t have been a surprise to him. As regards the first claim, Jesus words relate directly to what has just been discussed by Jesus and Nicodemus knowing the truth about God and God’s care for His people. We hear, clearly and truly enough, Jesus’ claim that He has pre-existed for all time. But that would not necessarily be what Nicodemus would understand. Nicodemus would probably think in terms of what David said [in Psalm 139], that God knew who David was before He formed him in the womb. Jeremiah said the same thing [in Jeremiah 1], “before I was born God formed, planned out my days and called me to a specific work that He had already arranged for me to do.”

As we think of Nicodemus, we should appreciate the fact that Nicodemus is not ignorant of the Word of God. As a Pharisee he doubtless knew [the Word] exceedingly well. But there is a problem. Nicodemus approaches the word of God incorrectly. Nicodemus is trapped inside his limitations. There is an implication to the idea that you can approach truth incorrectly. If we believe that there is something called truth, we necessarily believe that there is something called falsehood. What we recognize is that having access to any body of information does not automatically mean you understand the truth that is being told to you. That recognition should give us tremendous inner pause, in our day most particularly. For our day is characterized by an almost endless variety of translations of the Word of God. Some of them are translations; some of them are paraphrases. You should ask yourself very soberly, “As I take up the Word of God, am I taking up the Word of God, or somebody’s rendition and interpretation and rearrangement and modification and rewriting and amending and reshaping in order that as I read it, it does not offend me or trouble me or challenge me but rather soothes me, and eases me, and makes me feel comfortable. You should ask that question. Because, you see, Nicodemus was a man who knew the Word of God, but he didn’t know it correctly. How do I know he didn’t know it correctly? Because when Jesus came and revealed himself and the truth about who he was, what did the Pharisees say? “No!” Jesus said, “You study Moses and you think you have eternal life in Moses, and you do, but if you in fact would listen to Moses you would know who I am, but you do not know who I am.” They read the word and they were blind. We know the end of the story. We know that Jesus is in heaven. He is the heaven sent Savior. He is the one who descended, not the one who ascended, the one who descended with the word of truth that we might know it. We know that he died for the sins of all mankind, for all who believe in Him. They are forgiven from the guilt of sin and they are released from the controlling power of sin. We know these things. Nicodemus did not.

As Christians there are a couple of significant lessons we see in Jesus’ words. The first we note is Jesus’ uncompromising statement that no one ascends to heaven, no one. This is a general truth which we see in Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus. All humanity, all of it, is trapped inside the limitations of their blindness. No one on their own by any power available to humanity in their present or natural condition enables them to ascend to heaven and gain access to the truth. This is true even for someone like Nicodemus, and that is who Jesus is talking to.

I have on occasion – I do not remember the last time – said, don’t ever open your Bibles without first asking God to stir you up in heart and mind by the power of the Holy Spirit, because your natural mind will not understand this word. What your natural mind will do with this word is twist it, rearrange it, edit it, remake it into the image of your preference. You want to come to the word in submission to the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God and recognize that God has a great deal to say that you are not going to want to hear, because you’re sinners. It is essential for us, then, to come stripped of any illusions regarding our privileged status before God! No one can ascend to heaven. We are dependent upon God. This is why salvation always begins with God, always!

That is the first lesson. The second lesson is found in the particulars of the bronze serpent. In case you are not familiar you might go and read Numbers 21:4-9. I am not going to do that myself. You can scan it through. The bronze serpent became known as “Nehushtan”. It is very interesting; in the wilderness God told Moses to fashion a bronze serpent. He did. They used it in the circumstances to have healing from the bites of these serpents. Then do you know what the children of Israel did? They did their favorite thing when it comes to worship: they created an idol. They began to worship the snake. That you could look at it and make it heal you was very impressive to them.

The essential thing, however, to take note of as you read Numbers, is that the bronze serpent only worked under very specific circumstances. It only worked if you looked at it. You had to look at it. So, right now if a snake came in and bit somebody on the right side of the room, and this [bouquet on a pedestal] was the bronze snake, instead of going “Ahh” and looking at what bit them, what did they have to do? They had to look at the bronze serpent.

What is the lesson in that? The serpent did no good at all if you ignored it. Even if you set it up in some prominent place; even if you gathered round it and prayed and worshiped and sang songs and were all full of joy and excitement about the wonderful serpent. Because when you got bit, all of that was irrelevant. What you had to do was look at the serpent when you got bit.

This is what the Pharisees ended up doing with the Word of God. They exalted the Word of God, they exalted and praised the Law of God, they held God in such honor they would not say God’s name; it was precious and holy. True! So they began surrounding the Law of God with more and more rules and regulations so that you wouldn’t rush in. But then they left the Word of God in the synagogue when they walked out and began to deal with people. They did not actually let the Word of God measure and direct their understanding and living day by day. When the serpent of sin would bite them in the world at large, they did not then look to the Word of God, not to God. Their hearts were hardened and their minds were blind. It is possible, you see, to turn the Word into an idol. We have to ask a question: Have we allowed our worship to become a routine, an empty form, something that happens in isolated moments, but is not the living and breathing breath of God throughout the course of our days? Does what we worship direct, shape and control what we desire, or what we admire? Does it control what we find entertaining? Does it determine the books that we read and the films that we watch? Are we conscious about this?

Let me say right here, it will not do, beloved, to simply draw up a set of secondary rules that tell you ahead of time that “I don’t even have to think about 89 things!” Because who set up secondary rules to beat all secondary rules? It was the Pharisees! Thinking to themselves that they had managed to create a fail safe system whereby they would not fall into sin, they fell into sin. It is this that you need to know, the Word of God and the Word which breathes in this Word. Does the Word determine how I handle my money, how I treat my family, and how I treat my friends? This is very comprehensive; it is intended to be.

There is a second lesson here relative to the bronze serpent. This one doesn’t pertain to many of you, perhaps. The serpent was no good if you got yourself someplace where you couldn’t see it. It only worked if when you got bitten you looked to see it on the top of its pole. Surely we see a lesson here, a lesson of faith, a lesson in the need for the kind of faith that is with us and guides our actions in every moment of need. It is a self-defeating choice to abandon daily reading of the Word, daily prayer, frequent worship and service in order to escape dull routine. The classic line – and Nini and I ran into it at our family reunion (not my family reunion for all my family are good; her family reunion!) – “Why don’t you go to church?” “It’s just full of hypocrites!” “Well you’d fit fine!” “It is dull and it does nothing for me spiritually.”

There are some things for us to remember. It is significant that the word that John uses in v. 14 for “lifting up” Jesus means to lift up physically – that’s what they did to Him on the Cross – but it also means to exalt. As if often the case in John’s Gospel when you read it in the original, his words, and often in the English translation, there is often more than one layer of meaning that is there in that word. That is correct. It is essential for us to understand that Jesus died for the world. That is correct; He did. He died for the world. Look at your scriptures now and we will go a bit further. In John 3:16, that verse which all of us have probably memorized, *“God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”* Listen to the seventeenth verse and tell me what you hear: *“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved.”* What do you hear? World, world, world: what does God love? He loves the world; He loves the world; He loves the world. Repetition is one of the ways that scripture has of underscoring the importance of something, and a threefold repetition is the highest level of emphasis you can find in scripture. The world: what does God love? He loves the world. What does God love? He loves the world. Jesus died for the world. What a tragedy that at any point in time the church of Jesus Christ should turn its back on the world. What do we think we are doing? How can we ignore or community? How can we ignore its way of life?

How can we ignore the people who walk the streets? How can we be indifferent to the increase of sin in their lives, and the increase of disorder in their lives, and the pain and the suffering from people who are sunk in ignorance? Jesus died for the world. We have forgotten this. We are so interested in “brands snatched from the burning” that we have forgotten that Jesus died for the world!

But of course it is also the case that He died in protest against the world. The world is rotten; it is under the power of the prince of the air; it is filled with pain, cruelty, and arrogant blindness. So, exalting on a cross for love’s sake for and against. And that is what you and I must be: for-against. *“God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved.”* What is going to be saved: the world! *“Whoever believes in Him is not condemned; but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the only Son of God.”* What did you just hear: believe, believe, believe! In the seventeenth verse you have “world”, “world”, “world”; in the eighteenth verse you have “believe”, “believe”, “believe”.

What of us? Do we believe sufficiently to love what we must die for? Let us pray:

Our gracious Father, You have allowed us to gather together here today and remember the paradigm, the ultimate and only perfect expression of righteous love. That is Your Son, our Savior, Jesus. We want to be like Him. We desire that Your Spirit would work within us, that it would please You to use us, and in the using we will know the joy of Your salvation and the deathless hope of those who have received the gift of eternal life, because, Father, we believe in Jesus. In His name; Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Do you sometimes feel as if personal devotions and attending worship has become a dead routine? What are some ways of avoiding or correcting this?
2. How do you respond to people who say they are better off (more spiritual) by staying away from church (place of dead routines and full of hypocrites) and by listening to God through nature, inspirational writers and so on?
3. Why is God’s justice as important as His mercy?
4. According to the message, why is affirming the truth the key or foundation for the salvation of lost souls?
5. What is the essence sin?
6. What does John 3:16 affirm that the world disbelieves and denies? Do you ever struggle with the same problem?
7. “It is almost universally the case that people think they are the exception to what is the rule for everyone else.” Agree or disagree?
8. What is the difference between uncertainty and unbelief as John speaks of it in 3:18?
9. What differentiates the saved from the unsaved in responding to the convicting work of the Spirit in their lives?