

Feasting on the Word[®]

LENTEN COMPANION

A THEMATIC RESOURCE
FOR PREACHING AND WORSHIP

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Introduction

Easter is the highest holy day of the Christian faith, but to celebrate it in a vacuum, without immersion in all that comes before the resurrection—both chronologically and theologically—robs the day of its true significance. Lent can be a hard sell for many worshipers, with its intentional solemnity and encouragement toward self-denial. Others find it to be the most meaningful time of year—the most honest time of year, when we wrestle with the hard things of life and walk with Jesus through the darkest days of his life as well.

Feasting on the Word Lenten Companion offers an alternative and supplement to the Revised Common Lectionary for the Sundays and other significant days of Lent. In keeping with other *Feasting on the Word* resources, the *Lenten Companion* offers pastors focused resources for sermon preparation, ready-to-use liturgies for a complete order of worship, and hymn suggestions to support each day's scriptural and theological focus. Four essays provide exegetical, theological, homiletical, and pastoral perspectives on an Old Testament and a Gospel text for each Sunday. These essays are written by scholars, pastors, seminary professors, and denominational leaders, offering a bounty of starting points for the preacher to consider. The resources in this volume are a combination of material from existing *Feasting on the Word* volumes and newly written material.

The Gospel text for each Sunday features an encounter Jesus had during his public ministry and invites us into our own encounters with Jesus during the Lenten season. Complementary Old Testament passages enhance themes presented in the Gospel texts. A children's sermon is also included for each service to make the themes and texts of Lent accessible to all ages in the congregation, enriching the experience of worship with stories that respect both a child's intelligence and theological integrity. A liturgy for Holy Eucharist is included in the Holy Thursday service. This liturgy can

also be incorporated where appropriate in Sunday services, depending on your congregation's worship patterns.

Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday services provide the essential bridge between Palm Sunday and Easter and include liturgies and a sample homily based on traditional texts for those holy days.

Finally, to expand and enhance the congregation's experience of Lent, midweek services (beginning with Ash Wednesday and concluding with Wednesday of Holy Week) are also provided in this volume. These abbreviated liturgies and sample homilies are ideal for use in an existing midweek worship or Bible study gathering or a special series offered just for the weeks of Lent. These resources may also offer additional inspiration for planning Sunday worship.

Overview of Lent

Lent is a time of self-reflection and penitence, a time to acknowledge our sinfulness and need for God's mercy. From the church's earliest days, Lent was a time of preparation for baptism of new converts and penitence leading to the reconciliation of those estranged from the community.

Mirroring the forty days of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (which itself mirrored forty-day periods of trial experienced by Noah, Moses, and Elijah), the season of Lent begins forty-six days before Easter Sunday. Because every Sunday was to be a celebration of the resurrection and therefore not a day of fasting, the Sundays of Lent are not included in the forty penitential days of Lent.

On Ash Wednesday, Christians are invited to enter a period of self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, and self-denial. We are called to use these forty days as a time of reflection on our sins, the ways that we separate ourselves from God and from one another. Thus it is easy to characterize Lent as the somber, solemn period of the church year, but there is also joy to be found in the journey. The juxtapositions of mortality and eternity, sin and grace, death and life, make the path to Jesus' cross and tomb a rugged, rewarding terrain.

Lent can be a dangerous time. People come to the church looking for discipline and a new way to live; they come to be challenged—prepared for the heartache and joy of the cross to come. The fallacy of Lent can occur when we contain the season to six weeks of intentionality and introspection rather than building a Lent that becomes a life.

It is dangerous to meet Jesus in the dark places, to ask the same questions of ourselves that Jesus asks of his disciples, to accept Jesus' radical touch. In these moments of utter truth and honesty, we find ourselves vulnerable enough to connect with the risen Christ as never before.

Weekly Texts and Themes

	Old Testament	Gospel	Theme
First Sunday of Lent	Num. 21:4–9 (the bronze serpent)	John 3:1–21 (Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night)	Jesus offers salvation; the value of seeking, questioning, and openness
Second Sunday of Lent	Exod. 17:1–7 (water from the rock)	John 4:1–42 (Samaritan woman at the well meets Jesus)	Jesus provides living water; God's provision
Third Sunday of Lent	Isa. 35:4–7a (phrophecy of a messiah who heals)	John 9:1–41 (a blind man is healed by Jesus)	Jesus brings healing; compassion is more important than rules
Fourth Sunday of Lent	Ezek. 37:1–14 (Ezekiel prophesies to dry bones)	John 11:1–46 (Lazarus is raised from the dead)	Jesus gives life even where there is death; hope in the midst of despair
Fifth Sunday of Lent	1 Kgs. 17:8–16 (Elijah and the widow's oil that does not run out)	John 12:1–11 (Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus' feet)	Jesus loves abundantly and invites us to love abundantly too
Sixth Sunday of Lent	1 Sam. 16:1–13 (anointing the boy David)	John 13:1–17, 34–35 (Jesus washes Peter's feet)	Jesus reverses expectations; God exalts the lowly and humbles the proud
Easter Sunday	Isa. 65:17–25 (a new heaven and a new earth)	John 20:1–18 (Mary Magdalene meets the risen Christ)	Jesus triumphs over death; the kingdom has come

Texts for Midweek Services

	Focus Texts	Theme
Week One (Ash Wednesday)	Isa. 58:1–12 (the fast God chooses)	Fasting for justice
Week Two	Matt. 6:1–6, 16–21 (beware of practicing piety before others)	Fasting in humility
Week Three	Josh. 5:2–12 (new food for the promised land)	Fasting as appreciation
Week Four	Luke 4:1–13 (Jesus' fasting and temptation in the wilderness)	Fasting in faith
Week Five	Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 (rend your hearts and not your clothing)	Fasting as repentance
Week Six	Acts 11:1–12 (Peter's vision of clean and unclean foods)	Fasting for reconciliation
Week Seven	Exod. 12:1–14 (Passover and its commemoration)	Fasting as redemption

Triduum Texts

	Old Testament	Gospel	Theme
Holy Thursday	Isa. 50:4–9	John 13:1–2, 20–32	Jesus is betrayed
Good Friday	Isa. 52:13–53:12	John 18:28–19:30	Jesus is killed
Holy Saturday	Job 14:1–14	John 19:38–42	Jesus is dead

First Sunday of Lent

Numbers 21:4–9

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” ⁶Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:1–21

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about

earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

ORDER OF WORSHIP

OPENING WORDS / CALL TO WORSHIP

Come to the Lord with openness,
seeking God's presence whatever it brings.
Bring doubt, bring belief.
Seek the Lord and live.

John 3:1–2, 14–15

HYMN, SPIRITUAL, OR PSALM

CALL TO CONFESSION

We cannot earn God's grace or favor.
It comes to us, not as something owed,
but as a gift freely given.
Confident in God's love for us,
even when we are ungodly,
we confess our sins in faith.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**Gracious God, we come before you
in need of forgiveness and grace.
You call us to trust in you completely,
but we do not.**

**We are timid and fearful as we follow your lead.
We justify our actions and words,
though we know they are not what you require.
We struggle to understand the new life Christ offers,
preferring old habits to risky change.
Forgive us, we pray.
Help us to be born again into the life of Christ,
trusting that you have included us by grace
in the family of faith.
In Christ's name we pray. Amen.**

John 3:3

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Friends, God is for us and not against us!
For that very reason,
God sent the Son into the world
not to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved through him.
Believe the good news,
in Jesus Christ we are forgiven!

John 3:16-17

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of wilderness and nighttime,
as we devote these forty days to you,
shape us by your Holy Spirit
into the image of Christ our Lord,
so that we may be ready, by your grace,
to confront the power of death
with the promise of eternal life. **Amen.**

Num. 21:4-5; John 3:2

HYMN, SPIRITUAL, OR PSALM

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

God of signs and wonders,
we come to your word again and again,
seeking understanding
and the new life it offers.
By the power of your Holy Spirit,
illumine our hearts and minds
so that we may believe this testimony
and have eternal life.

John 3:1-15

In the name of Jesus Christ,
our teacher and Savior, we pray. **Amen.**

SCRIPTURE READINGS

SERMON

HYMN, SPIRITUAL, OR PSALM

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

God our Helper,
we thank you for keeping our lives
always in your care and protection
and pray for any and all who are in harm's way.
For those walking in the midst of danger . . .
for those who are treading a slippery path . . .
for those exhausted and seeking relief . . .
for those who face a mountain of worry or debt
or any other obstacles. . . .
Be Guardian and Guide, we pray,
setting all our feet on your paths of righteousness and peace.

We pray for those who are struggling
with a new challenge or call . . .
with a major transition in life or livelihood . . .
with their faith and understanding . . .
with grief, ancient or new . . .
Keep in your tender care and mercy, O God,
those who are sick in mind, body, or spirit . . .
those weighed down by depression or pain . . .
those recuperating from surgery or accident. . . .

Protect not only us and those we love,
but also the whole wide world you so love.
In places of war, bring peace . . .
in places beset by natural disaster, bring calm and restoration . . .
where there is unrest and injustice, make justice our aim.
Where hope has grown tired and thin, lift our sights,
so that we may see hope beyond hope,
life beyond death,

and you, lifted up before us.
In the name of Christ,
who gave himself for our sake, we pray. **Amen.**

LORD'S PRAYER

INVITATION TO THE OFFERING

In plenty or in want, all that we have is a gift from God. *Num. 21:5*
In faith and gratitude,
we return now a portion
of what we have so abundantly received,
as grateful heirs of the promises of God.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING/DEDICATION

Gracious God,
we dedicate to you not only these gifts,
but also ourselves, in deep gratitude—
for your call on our lives,
your guidance in the baptismal journey,
and for blessing us
that we may be a blessing to others.
Accept what we bring
for your own good purposes.
In Christ we pray. **Amen.**

HYMN, SPIRITUAL, OR PSALM

CHARGE

Go out in faith,
trusting in God's sense of direction.
Remember how much God loves this world *John 3:16*
and so love the world in the name of Christ,
that your testimony becomes the good news *John 3:11-12*
someone else has been waiting to receive.

BLESSING

You are free from condemnation, free to question
and seek,
knowing God's love surrounds you in both the
dark of night and light of day. Amen.

SONG SUGGESTIONS

Included are songbook numbers for the Chalice Hymnal (CH), the Episcopal Church's Hymnal 1982 (EH), Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW), the Gather Comprehensive, Second Edition (GC), Glory to God (GTG), The New Century Hymnal (TNCH), and the United Methodist Hymnal (UMH).

“Ah Lord, How Shall I Meet Thee?” (ELW 241, GTG 104, TNCH 102)

“As Moses Raised the Serpent Up” (TNCH 605)

“Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom” (GTG 174)

“God Loved the World” (ELW 323, TNCH 208)

“I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say” (EH 692, ELW 332 and 611, GC 622, GTG 182, TNCH 489)

“Lord of the Dance” (GC 689, GTG 157, UMH 261)

“Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days” (CH 180, EH 142, ELW 319, GC 416, GTG 166, TNCH 211, UMH 269)

“What Wondrous Love Is This” (EH 439, ELW 666, GC 614, GTG 215, TNCH 223, UMH 292)

CHILDREN'S SERMON

Based on John 3:1–17

One night a visitor came looking for Jesus. This visitor was a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Jewish leader, a Pharisee. He knew a lot about God's law. When he found Jesus, Nicodemus asked, “Teacher, it is clear that you are a teacher sent by God because you have done many things that no one can do unless God is with that one.” Nicodemus did not say what things Jesus had done, but apparently many Jewish people were talking about the wonderful things Jesus had done.

“Nicodemus, I assure you,” said Jesus, “unless a person has been born a new person, it is not possible to see God's kingdom.”

Nicodemus was puzzled. “What are you saying, Jesus? Once you are born as a baby, how can you be born again? That is impossible, isn't it?”

Jesus' answer sounded almost as if he did not hear Nicodemus's question.

“I tell you, Nicodemus, unless a person is born of water and the Spirit of God, that person cannot be a part of God's kingdom. This is a different birth. Do not be confused that I said you must be born a new person. God's Spirit

blows wherever it wants to blow. You may hear its sound, but you do not know what direction it comes from or in what direction it goes.”

If it had not been night and too dark to see Nicodemus’s face, Jesus would have seen how confused Nicodemus looked.

“How can any of what you say be? Is this really possible?”

Gently, Jesus answered, “Nicodemus, you are a teacher of Israel. Do you not know these things? If I tell you about things on earth and you do not understand, how can you ever understand what I tell you about things of God not on earth? Yet God loved the world so much that God sent a son to the world, so everyone who believes in this son will be with God forever.”

On his way home, Nicodemus surely thought about Jesus’ words and what they meant for him.

SERMON HELPS

Numbers 21:4–9

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

When Christian interpreters read this passage in Numbers, it is almost impossible not to jump immediately to the Gospel of John and Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:1–21). In response to the Pharisee leader’s questions about participation in the “kingdom of God,” Jesus was remembered as saying, finally, “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just 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” (John 3:13–15). For the writer of the Gospel this extended conversation with Jesus pointed forward to Jesus being “lifted up” on the cross, from the grave, and into the heavenly realm of God. Moses’s experience in the wilderness was understood as a type pointing to a spiritual event in the future, namely, the redemptive work of Jesus.

The account in Numbers, however, has theological significance quite apart from Jesus. First, this story stands at the end of a series of “murmuring stories” that provide narrative structure for the wilderness traditions. From the beginning the people grumbled and complained about their condition in the desert (Exod. 16:2–3). Their complaints are noted at several different points along the way (e.g., Num. 11, 14, 16, 20) but come to a climax in Numbers 21. The failure to trust God (and God’s intermediary, Moses) is the basic issue.

In the Bible, the concept of “faith” is regularly understood as “trust”

rather than “belief.” Moses did not challenge the people to “believe” in some doctrine about God. The aim of Moses was for the people to move forward trusting that God would keep the divine commitment to lead the people to a new land. In the immediately preceding verses (Num. 21:1–3) Israel had won a victory over the Canaanites after appealing for divine assistance. But then, as was regularly the case when one considers the long history of Israel’s relationship with God, the people lapsed into their untrusting, unfaithful attitude and “spoke against God and against Moses” (21:5). Usually in the Bible, rebellion against God takes the form of faithlessness. And those who are “unfaithful” and “untrusting” are quite often unreliable toward one another as well as toward God.

There is a second important theological issue imbedded in this passage. What is the function of the bronze snake that Moses hoisted up before the people? For many, religious icons—indeed religion itself—are symbols connected with a belief in magic. The bronze snake to such folk was intended to assure people that divine, supernatural powers could be marshaled whenever needed to alleviate a human difficulty, namely a plague of venomous, hurtful reptiles. Such magical signs were believed to ward off evil and provide protection. All a sufferer had to do was look upon the magic icon, and relief was assured. In the course of Christian history some have considered the elements of the communion table in this way, but of course this is not a proper understanding.

Closely connected to such a magical approach was an even more dangerous possibility, at least from the Bible’s point of view: idolatry. Deeply rooted in Israel’s tradition was the prohibition against creating any image as a representative of the divine. The second commandment forbids all such representations (Exod. 20:4–6; Deut. 5:8–10). The worship or reverencing of any one or any thing other than God was a deadly error. It was utterly foolish to put trust in inert, unhearing, uncaring human creations. Such a perversion was a certain road to destruction (e.g., Exod. 32:1–10; Isa. 40:18–20; 41:21–28; 44:9–20; 46:1–7; Jer. 10:1–16; Pss. 115:3–8; 135:15–18). Paul, in his letter to the Romans, brought the biblical understanding of the connection of idolatry to sinful rebellion and death to forceful expression (Rom. 1:18–32). Idolatry has continued on the list of warnings that Jewish and Christian leaders regularly and rightly cite to their people.

Moses’s bronze snake could easily have become an idol. In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, representations of snakes were often used as symbols for various deities, mostly dangerous ones, but sometimes the bringers of healing and fertility. Indeed, centuries later King Hezekiah, during a religious reform, removed from the temple “the bronze serpent that Moses had made,

for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan” (2 Kgs. 18:4b). Thus we are reminded that things intended for one purpose can be turned to another. For some, the noblest of virtues can become twisted into icons of self-adulation. Nation, wealth, power, religion—we know the possibilities.

Finally, this passage prompts us to reflect once again, particularly in this Lenten season, about the relation between repentance and forgiveness. The first response of God to the clamorous, faithless griping of the Israelites was to send snakes among them as punishment (Num. 21:6). We do not like to consider that sin should receive judgment, but there is every reason it should. Certainly the continuing debate about the character and effectiveness of the atonement worked by Jesus suggests that judgment and punishment of sin is an important consideration.

More to the point of Lent, however, is that repentance is very much a possibility and a desire from God’s point of view. When the Israelites recognized their transgression, they came to Moses and asked for his intercession to God on their behalf (Num. 21:7). Repentance is hardly ever a completely individual and private affair. Most of the time a candid admission of sin—unlike the generalized, one-size-fits-all kind often offered in corporate worship—requires the recognition of how one’s individual (or a community’s) behavior has harmed others. Each individual has to take responsibility for his or her behavior. Forgiveness and healing are readily available, but faithful repentance is necessary. As the apocryphal or deutrocanonical book *Wisdom of Solomon* notes, “For the one who turned toward it [the bronze serpent] was saved, not by the thing that was beheld, but by you, the Savior of all” (Wis. 16:7). This was not magic or idolatry, but faith, and no one could do it for another.

W. EUGENE MARCH

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

The Scripture passage from Numbers 21 describes a weird, mysterious, even gruesome, scene. The story should be read in the context of the church calendar and within the breadth of the scriptural narrative. The passage echoes the Lenten journey of repentance, drawing the reader into the drama of the suffering cross and the redemption of Easter. Today’s pastoral message is this: The cross comes before the resurrection. Sometimes suffering is the only path to redemption, and often the road to healing and light runs straight through darkness and pain. It may not be a comforting message, but it is a truthful one.

Moses has led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Day after day they

have been tramping around in the desert, with God providing manna to eat and Moses at the helm. Because they are weary and frustrated, not at all sure where they are going or if their leader Moses knows what he is doing, and sure they are about to die, dissension has grown in the ranks. The “Let’s go back to Egypt” committee gets wound up. “Let’s go back to Egypt!” they whine. “Slavery in Egypt was bad, but it was better than freedom. With freedom comes too many choices,” they cry. A pastor friend says that every church he has ever been a part of has had a “Let’s go back to Egypt” committee, a group of people who are opposed to any sort of change and always want to go back to the way things used to be.

Eventually God has enough of their whining and sends a pack of poisonous serpents into their midst. Many in their number die before the “Let’s go back to Egypt” committee convinces Moses to change God’s mind. We have heard this story of a serpent getting the best of God’s people before, back in the garden of Eden. No wonder the Israelites were terrified.

The drama turns when Moses crafts a poisonous serpent made of bronze and lifts it high on a pole. All the Israelites who had died were given new life, and every time an Israelite was bitten by a snake, all he or she had to do was look to the serpent and be healed. Anyone who has had surgery knows something about the terror and healing of snakes on a pole. The American Medical Association adopted the image of the ancient Greek god of healing, a snake twined on a staff. Sometimes, when you go to the hospital, they have to hurt you before they can heal you. Danger frequently paves the way to new life. Often an image of ugliness and death can be the means to wholeness. In this way, the Numbers story echoes the larger story of salvation. Jesus’ violent death on the cross is the moment of God’s redemption and the reconciliation between God and creation. Still, whether it is Moses raising up a dead serpent or Jesus bleeding on the cross, it is an odd way for God to show God’s love and mercy to his people, granting healing through pain and lifting high an image of ugliness and death to bring about new life.

Pastorally, issues of pain, healing, and redemption are always important, particularly leading up to Easter. Thus the passion and resurrection of Jesus should be one of the primary hermeneutics for reading Scripture during Lent. As it is read in the context of Christian worship, the story of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness foreshadows Good Friday and Easter morning. This is particularly true when this lesson is placed alongside the Gospel reading for the day, John 3:1–17. John tells us that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up (v. 14). Seen through the eyes of the church, the image of death lifted high on a pole is not that of a serpent, but that of God in Christ lifted high on the cross.

When Jesus says, “God so loved the world,” Jesus is asking us to see the God who created the world out of love as the same God who is lifted high on the cross in redeeming love. Sometimes it is hard to know whether love feels like dying or being lifted up, like the cross of Good Friday or the glory of Easter morning. Lent always journeys through Good Friday and all of us will eventually bear the sadness of the cross. Pastors know well that pain and love mingle together in our own stories, and in the lives of those whom we serve, as they do in the heart of God.

We are entering into Lent, that forty-day journey into the desert of our brokenness and the barrenness of our souls. The passage tells us that the answer to the Israelites wandering in the wilderness was lifting their eyes to see death on a pole. Only the serpent raised by Moses’s arm gave new life to the dead Israelites and protected the rest. The church says the answer to our wandering in the wilderness of our sin is when the Son of Man is lifted high on the cross, the love of God given for the world. The tragedy of the story is that rather than receiving the heart of God, we tried to remake Jesus in our own image. When that did not work, we spit on him, whipped him, raised him up on a cross, and watched as the heart of God shattered into a million pieces.

The pastoral equation this Sunday is not complicated, though it is hard to get our minds around. The path to redemption is coated in suffering. The cure for a snake is a snake. The cure for human life is one man’s life. The cure for death is death.

Lift up your eyes to the cross, and trust in the light of God’s redeeming grace.

CRAIG KOCHER

EXEGETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Complaints, Complaints! From its beginning, the narrative of the wilderness wandering of the escaped Hebrews is rife with reports of trouble and suffering, accompanied by constant complaining (KJV: “murmuring”) of the people against Moses and Aaron. The people did not like the bitter water of Marah (Exod. 15:22–25), so the Lord showed Moses how to sweeten it. They complained about the lack of food (Exod. 16:2–3), so the Lord gave them manna. They complained that they were thirsty (Exod. 17:3). Moses struck the rock at the Lord’s command and water gushed forth (see also Num. 20:1–13). When the march resumed after Sinai, they were back at it again, asking for meat to eat (Num. 11:4–6). A wind from the Lord brought quails, but the birds were accompanied by a plague. In Numbers 14, the people rebelled at the prospect of invading Canaan. They were saved from

extermination by an angry God through the intercession of Moses, but the Lord decreed that none of those who tested the Lord “ten times” (14:22), including Moses, should ever set foot in the promised land, except for Caleb, Joshua, and the innocent children (vv. 30–31).

Today’s text records the final complaint of the people. It culminates the entire series because for the first time the people “spoke *against God* and against Moses.” Whether or not the punishment by snakes is also climactic depends on how one views the pestilences and prohibition that precede it. Like other complaint stories in the series, this one too reports a gracious divine provision for survival. Does this one exceed the others? As we shall see, other biblical writers viewed God’s merciful gift in this text as a prototype of God’s ultimate provision for the survival and salvation of the people of God.

If It Does Not Kill You, It Will Make You Well. The final punishment inflicted by God upon the complainers is “poisonous serpents” (Num. 21:6; cf. Deut. 8:15) that bit and killed many people. The KJV translates this phrase “fiery serpents,” which is understandable, considering that the Hebrew word in question (vv. 6, 8) is *serafim*, derived from the verbal root *saraf*, “to burn.” Terrible as the wilderness critters must have been, however, it seems unlikely that the Hebrews encountered swarms of fire-breathing snakes or dragons (though Isaiah lists a “flying [fiery] serpent” among the animals of the Negeb, Isa. 30:6; see also Isa. 14:29). We are left to speculate that the fire of the “poisonous serpents” spoken of in most modern English translations may be the burning sensation in the vicinity of the snakebite.

In verses 8–9 we read of a bronze *saraf* that Moses is instructed to fashion and lift up on a pole. The very thing that killed people was graciously ordered by God, in replicated form, to ward off death and bring healing to the victims. The function is like that of the blood of the Passover lamb on the doorposts in Egypt (Exod. 12:1–13). The death of the lamb, symbolized by its blood, warded off the death of the firstborn in the households of Israelites.

Serpents rank high among cultic symbols around the world. As is the case in this passage, they play the ambiguous role of killer/healer. The serpent could stand for wisdom (think Gen. 3:1), fertility, and many other good things, as well as danger and death. Western culture, which is generally not fond of snakes (think of Medusa’s hairdo), also draws from classical mythology a connection of serpents with healing. A prime example is Asclepius, the Greek healing deity. His staff, marked by a single twisted serpent, has been widely adopted in Europe and America as the symbol of the medical arts.

The Bronze Serpent as an Object of Worship. Nothing in this passage suggests the people immediately began to create a cult around the God-given source of their healing. By 2 Kings 18:4, however, we have evidence that such a thing did eventually happen. The first reform instituted by Hezekiah after he acceded to the throne of Judah in about 715 BCE was to destroy the idols and images that divided the absolute loyalty of the Judeans to YHWH. Among other things, “He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.” From this we learn (a) that the serpent on a pole was still in Jerusalem centuries after the exodus period; (b) that people were worshipping it, because they were making offerings to it; and (c) it had a name that appears to be a play on the two Hebrew words *nahash*, “serpent,” and *nehoshet*, “bronze or copper.” Was this object located in the temple itself? Did it depict a lesser deity than YHWH? Does the explicit link to Numbers 21:4–9 suggest that that story began to be told in later years to explain an eighth-century-BCE object of worship? Were the people mistaking the magical agent of healing for the true and only Healer? We cannot answer any of these questions definitively, but the tentative answer to all of them is yes.

The Foreground of the Bronze Serpent. In front of the Franciscan friary that marks the traditional site of Mount Nebo, east of the Dead Sea, where Moses viewed the promised land that he would never enter, and where he died (Deut. 32:48–52; 34:1–8), stands a tall hammered metal sculpture by the Florentine artist Giovanni Fantoni. It depicts Moses’s serpent on its pole, and it also evokes the cross of Christ. This work of art dramatizes the importance that Christians typically attach to the bronze serpent of Numbers 21:4–9. It is the prototype of the visible life-giving work of God manifested above all in its prime counterpart, the atoning death of Jesus. The Gospel of John makes the link specific: “Just 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” (John 3:14–15). Exegete and homiletician alike must note this intrabiblical reimagining of the bronze serpent, because in the full canon of Scripture, the primitive image on the pole comes to mean more than it meant.

W. SIBLEY TOWNER

HOMILETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This odd passage from the book of Numbers owes its presence in the lectionary to the Gospel reading for the day. Without John’s cryptic reference to the serpent in the wilderness as a simile for the Son of Man, preachers

might never wrestle one of the most puzzling stories in Torah. Yet wrestle it they must, if they want to preach the gospel. In what sense is the lifting up of the Son of Man like Moses's lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness? What possible significance can this text have to a Christian congregation today?

The story is the last of five "murmuring" stories in the book of Numbers. Over and over, the people complain (or rail, or rebel, or speak against) their leaders in the wilderness. God moves to punish the people for their sedition. Moses intercedes on their behalf. In the present case, the people speak against God as well as Moses, which may be why this is the last mention of their murmuring. Complaining about Moses and Aaron is one thing. Complaining about God is something else altogether.

Their complaint is absurd as well as seditious. They have no food and water, they say, "and we detest this miserable food." What food? Are they hallucinating? At least they hope they are hallucinating when they see poisonous snakes crawling out of the rocks, heading straight for their feet. But no; these snakes are real. When they bite people, those people die, which brings the living abruptly to their senses. They repent of their sin, pleading with Moses to intercede for them with God.

The divine answer to their prayer is what makes this passage so odd. God tells Moses to make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole. Is this not an idol, and an Egyptian one at that? Didn't Pharaoh wear a headdress with a spitting cobra on it? Everyone who is bitten shall look upon it and live, God says. Is this not magic? Since when does a statue confer life? However problematic the answers to these questions are, the plan works. It works so well, in fact, that the people turn the snake sculpture into one of their ancestral treasures. Five hundred years later, it shows up in the temple in Jerusalem with a name (Nehushtan) and a popular following that leads King Hezekiah to destroy it (2 Kgs. 18:4).

As if all of this were not already a handful, the Hebrew word for the poisonous (literally, "fiery") serpent is *seraph*. Preachers will want to do their own word work here, paying special attention to the exegetical essay on this passage. If these fiery serpents are God-sent seraphim, then what does that say about the seraphim that show up elsewhere in Scripture? What can it mean that God's fiery ones both kill and save? Given the popular fascination with angels (manifest in a Web site that sells pink-cheeked seraphim named Emily and Abigail), this passage gives the preacher an opening to challenge the cultural captivity of God's messengers.

Preachers will also explore their associations with words such as "snake," "snakebite," and "fiery serpent." These are frightening words for many

people. A recent Harris poll on “What We Are Afraid Of” discovered that 36 percent of all adults in the United States list snakes as their number one fear. Ophidiophobia is the clinical word for this fear, which affects 49 percent of women and 22 percent of men. The preacher’s first impulse may be to calm this fear by intellectualizing the snake or (following John’s lead) by allegorizing it. To do this will lessen the impact of the language, however, and the impact of the sermon along with it. The teller of today’s story made full use of the human fear of snakes. The brave preacher will do no less.

While “venom” and “antivenom” do not appear in the passage, they are both alluded to. The bronze serpent is the medical antidote to the deadly bite of the fiery serpents. Once the people have recognized their sin and confessed it to Moses, their tormentor becomes their savior. Once Moses makes it possible for them to gaze fully upon what they are afraid of, they gain access to its healing power. Like the caduceus, this bronze serpent becomes a treasured sign of God’s power to heal. It is not a living snake, however, nor is it in any sense sacrificed for the sins of the people. This precludes any easy interpretation of John’s simile, especially for those preachers whose traditions stress substitutionary atonement. The passage from Numbers remains as mysterious as the passage from John. The preachers who honor the integrity of their composition will think twice before trying to clear their mysteries up.

In the context of Lent, there remains all kinds of room to think with the congregation about what humans are most afraid of and what that fear does to us, both as persons and as a people. What concrete things do we focus on that epitomize our fear? In what sense do these things become idols that keep our fear in place? What is God capable of doing with those idols, once they have been plucked out from under our feet and set up on a pole where we can see them clearly? How does God respond to our fear, both in the wilderness and at the foot of the cross?

There is also room for the preacher to consider the difference between faith in magic and faith in God. If the people believed that the bronze serpent was responsible for their cure, then that snake was an idol and Hezekiah was right to snap it in two. But if looking up at the serpent reminded the people to lift their hearts to God, then the snake was a sacrament. Looking up at it, they looked through it to their only Physician, who alone was their Health, their Salvation, and their Cure. Preachers who pursue this tack will connect the saving act of looking up to Christ with healing practices (actual or potential) in the life of the local congregation.

BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

John 3:1–17

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

This text is theologically rich and deeply provocative. Of the many themes that stir the imagination theologically, two are particularly important: the story's setting and what it suggests about discipleship, and its image of rebirth.

John begins the story somewhat abruptly. The reader is not told where the story takes place. We know only that Jesus is in Jerusalem during the Passover feast (2:23). John does little to introduce Nicodemus. We are told only that he is a Pharisee and a ruler, a member of the Sanhedrin. Readers familiar with the whole of John's story know that Nicodemus will reappear briefly, first interceding for Jesus with other Pharisees (7:50) and then in the story's conclusion (19:38–42), with Joseph of Arimathea, bringing spices to bury Jesus. Both in 3:1–21 and in 19:39 Nicodemus is identified as the one who first came to Jesus by night. He is the original night stalker.

Of the many images in John's Gospel, two major ones are light and darkness. Nicodemus emerges out of the night's darkness, seeking light from the teacher he believes to be sent from God. Just as suddenly as he appears, Nicodemus disappears back into the night from whence he came. Before he does so, Jesus tells him one must be born anew in order to see the kingdom of God, and the last we hear from Nicodemus is, "How can this be?" (v. 9). Jesus' last words are, "Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God" (v. 21). It will take Nicodemus a long time—until 19:38–42—to come once and for all out of the night and into the light.

Nicodemus is the one who comes to Jesus by night. He hovers on the margins and in the shadows of John's story. He is neither the first in the church nor the last to follow Jesus from afar. No doubt it was difficult, perhaps even dangerous, for Nicodemus to follow Jesus publicly, during the bright light of the day. He was, after all, someone who was part of the Jewish establishment, for whom Jesus seemed to be at first only a nuisance but later a political problem and threat. Nicodemus had to be cautious and to exercise discretion. He was the forerunner of many of Jesus' disciples who have had to be careful about when and where they practiced their discipleship.

In his seven letters to the churches in Asia, John of Patmos warned them to beware of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6, 15), Christians who were willing to offer worship to pagan and Roman gods in order to remain unnoticed, if not

tolerated, in a non-Christian world.¹ In the sixteenth century John Calvin referred to those who sympathized with the movement for the reform of the church but were reluctant to be publicly identified with it as “Nicodemites.” In the midst of National Socialism, Nicodemus’s heirs, the German Christians, sought to accommodate the gospel to the racism and anti-Semitism of Nazi ideology. In response, the Confessing Church in May 1934 declared, in the second thesis of the Theological Declaration of Barmen, “As Jesus Christ is God’s assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also *God’s mighty claim upon our whole life.*”²

Nicodemus admits that Jesus could not have performed his signs (2:23) unless God were with him. Jesus responds by answering a question Nicodemus did not ask. Not only is Jesus the presence of God, but those who are born from above—recreated in the water of baptism by the power of the Spirit—will see in these things Jesus has done the presence of the kingdom of God. Nicodemus does not understand what it means to be “born from above.” Jesus tells him that to be born from above is to be born of the Spirit, and to be born of the Spirit is to believe in Jesus and in believing in him to have eternal life.

What does it mean to be born from above and to believe in Jesus? To be born from above by water and the Spirit, to believe in Jesus, is to leave the darkness and to come into the light (v. 19). What does it mean to live either in darkness or in light? Those who live in the darkness and hate the light do so because their evil deeds will be exposed (v. 20). To come into the light—to be born from above—is to do “what is true” (v. 21), to follow the one who is himself “the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6).

For many Christians, the gospel is summarized by the words in John 3:16. Everyone who believes in Jesus will not perish but will have eternal life. Some Christians, however, understand faith or “believing in Jesus” to be simply what one does with one’s mind. In John’s Gospel, being born from above and believing in Jesus are clearly not so much about what one does with one’s mind as about what one does with one’s heart and one’s life. “Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (v. 21). In John’s Gospel believing and doing are inseparable. Nicodemus lives in the darkness and the shadows

1. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 123–25.
2. “The Theological Declaration of Barmen,” in the *Book of Confessions: Study Edition of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1996), 311 (8.14). Italics added.

of this story until its conclusion, when he emerges publicly with Joseph of Arimathea, who is also a “secret disciple,” to bury Jesus.

GEORGE W. STROUP

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of twenty-first-century church members, it might be Nicodemus. In many ways he is a sympathetic character. A successful and self-confident man, he plays a leadership role in his community. He is spiritually open and curious, yet also rational. He approaches Jesus directly and tries to figure out Jesus' actions and social networks. He is committed and curious enough that he makes an appointment to talk with Jesus face to face. However, Nicodemus is not ready to go public with his interest in Jesus, so he makes the appointment in the middle of the night, when he can keep his faith secret, separated from the rest of his life. His imagination is caught by Jesus, but he wants to compartmentalize whatever faith he has. Nicodemus is not yet ready to declare his faith in the light of day, not prepared to let it change his life.

Like it or not, we look into the eyes of people like Nicodemus every Sunday morning. Being a mainline Protestant is not exactly trendy, and though people may come to church occasionally or even be active members, many believers with whom we interact are Nicodemuses in their wider life. They have faith, sometimes deep faith, and they are spiritually curious, but they keep faith in its own sphere.

Being a Nicodemus-like Christian is understandable in the twenty-first century. Believers, who have mixed marriages or pluralistic work settings, privilege tolerance and mutual respect over witnessing. Cultural norms push religion into the private sphere, positioning faith as appropriate for family and personal morality but inappropriate for public issues. For two centuries mainline Protestantism has encouraged such behavior and attitudes. Our brand of religion promotes self-restraint, tolerance, and personal morality, and all are worthy virtues. We support public morality and an engagement in social issues, too, of course, but that message has been muffled by the declining size and increasing marginalization of mainline Protestant denominations. If people in our pews are Christians like Nicodemus, it is not necessarily because they have somehow failed as individual believers. In some cases we have pushed our members into their compartmentalized faith.

In and of itself, there is much to praise about a faith that thrives in the dark. It is genuine, heartfelt, personal, and often deep. The point is not that this hidden faith is somehow faulty—as far as it goes; the point is that it is

too small. In this text Jesus suggests that Nicodemus's kind of faith is incomplete, even immature. He likens his midnight encounter with Nicodemus to a child still safe in its mother's womb. You are still gestating, Jesus implies. You must be born again and declare this faith in the light of day.

Jesus seems impatient as he talks with Nicodemus. He is annoyed when Nicodemus does not immediately understand the metaphor of rebirth. He even mocks the Pharisee.

Jesus' impatience leads some people to read this text as a command: you must be born again. Many interpret rebirth as work that gestating Christians need to do. For these interpreters, the urgency of people making a decision to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior is paramount. However legitimate this interpretation might be, reading this text as a command is not the only option. In fact, it may be as legitimate—and certainly as pastoral—to read it as an invitation. When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born again by water and Spirit, he is asking Nicodemus to let God work in his life.

In a wonderful sermon on this text, Debbie Blue observes that the metaphor of birth in this text is surprising and provocative.³ It is surprising because it is so irrational, so beyond what will ever really happen to us physically, and Nicodemus gives voice to that. This invitation to rebirth is non-sensical; nobody can literally be born again.

The invitation is provocative too, because it invites us to open our imaginations and reconsider our relationship with God, which is the central focus of this text, and, indeed, of this Gospel. Jesus invites Nicodemus, as he invites each of us, to come into the light of day and become mature believers, full participants in the abundant life he offers. Jesus knows that neither Nicodemus nor contemporary believers can do this on their own. It is God who will give birth in water and Spirit. Rebirth is God's gift to give, God's work to accomplish, and it is God who labors to bring us new life.

God works hard for us and our faith. God conceives us as Christians and nurtures us in the wombs of our faith, safe and warm and secret. At some point, like any pregnant woman who is close to full term, God gets impatient with gestation and wants to get on with it; God wants to push that baby through the birth canal into greater maturity, into fullness of life, into a faith lived wholly in the world. That is what Jesus talks about in this text. Jesus thinks it is time Nicodemus came through that spiritual birth canal. Perhaps he thinks it is time for many others to be reborn too. God is ready to give us birth by water and Spirit.

3. Debbie Blue, "Laboring God," in *Sensual Orthodoxy* (St. Paul, MN: Cathedral Hill Press, 2004), 31–37.

How many of our church members (or preachers) might be Nicodemuses in twenty-first-century garb? How many of our congregations might be organizational versions of him—people and institutions with compartmentalized faiths that flourish behind the scenes, out of sight, away from the fray, essentially in private? How many of us are gestating Christians? Who among us has room to grow in our faith? The good news of this text is that God is prepared—even eager—to do the hard, messy, sweating labor that will bring us to maturity and new life.

DEBORAH J. KAPP

EXEGETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The story of Nicodemus is unique to John, and it epitomizes key themes for this Gospel. A recurring structural pattern for the Fourth Gospel is sign, dialogue, discourse. Jesus performs a sign that is followed by a dialogue between Jesus and those present and then a discourse by Jesus that interprets the sign. While Jesus does not perform a sign for Nicodemus, Nicodemus's reference to "signs" in verse 2 introduces the conversation with Jesus and sets up Jesus' discourse in verses 10–21. In verses 19–21, Jesus discloses a major theme for the Gospel of John, light and darkness. Light represents the realm of belief and darkness the realm of unbelief. When Jesus says to Nicodemus, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light" (v. 19), these words send the reader back to the beginning of chapter 3: Nicodemus comes to Jesus *by night*. The moment of judgment for Nicodemus is in this here-and-now encounter with Jesus.

It is because of Jesus' words in 3:18–21 that Nicodemus's meeting with Jesus is equivocal at best. The last words of Nicodemus to Jesus are "How can these things be?" (3:9), and in his conversation with Jesus he does not make much progress. Nicodemus interprets Jesus' words on a literal level, although (typical of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel) Jesus' words to him are deliberately ambiguous. "From above" (*anōthen*) can be translated three different ways—"again," "anew," or "from above" (3:3). Nicodemus hears only the first option. Whereas the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) will be able to move to the next level of understanding, Nicodemus is not able to recognize what Jesus offers and, more importantly, who Jesus is.

For John's Gospel, an encounter with Jesus is the salvific moment. The dialogue with Nicodemus is not simply explanatory or conversational on Jesus' part. Rather, Jesus as the Word made flesh makes God known to Nicodemus (1:18). The question is whether or not Nicodemus will be able to see the truth about Jesus that Nicodemus himself confesses, that Jesus is the one who has come from God (3:2). So as to move Nicodemus along, Jesus'

answer to Nicodemus's misunderstanding introduces the concept of being born of water and Spirit (v. 5).

While many commentators have interpreted these words through the lens of baptism, the whole of the Gospel narrative suggests other interpretive possibilities. In the next chapter, Jesus will offer himself as the source of living water (4:10) and will again connect water and Spirit, both of which he will provide (7:37–39). It is important, therefore, to situate interpretation of Jesus' words to Nicodemus within the context of Jesus' provision of water and this Gospel's unique understanding of the Spirit. The Spirit, the expressed gift from Jesus to the disciples when he reveals himself to them after the resurrection (20:22), is the Paraclete (Advocate, Comforter, Helper), the one who carries on the work and presence of Jesus when he returns to the Father. It should be this working out of water and Spirit that is brought forward to Jesus' words to Nicodemus.

After Nicodemus's incredulous question, "How can these things be?" (v. 9), he seems to disappear from the scene, and the reader is left with Jesus. All of a sudden, Jesus' words are directed specifically to the readers of the story. Verse 11 begins in the second person singular: "Very truly I tell you." Then the "you" in "yet you do not receive our testimony" switches to second person plural. This places the reader in the same position as Nicodemus: in an encounter with Jesus. God loves the world, and this Gospel intends to secure and sustain belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (20:30–31). Because of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus—all of which are implied in "the Son of Man must be lifted up"—eternal life is possible, but the incarnation ensures that eternal life includes life now, abiding in Jesus.

As for Nicodemus, he appears two other times in the Gospel of John. In 7:50–52 he seems to come to Jesus' defense in the midst of the intense conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities that sets off chapters 7 and 8, but his question to the Pharisees gives the impression of lukewarm advocacy for Jesus. Nicodemus's last appearance in the Gospel is to help Joseph of Arimathea, a *secret* disciple of Jesus, with the burial of Jesus' body (19:38–42). The reader is thereby reminded that Nicodemus first came to Jesus by night (19:39).

Moreover, he brings an extraordinary quantity of burial spices for the preparation of the body. Does this last appearance of Nicodemus finally represent his coming to the light? Or is he still in the dark, weighing down Jesus' body with spices so there will be no doubt that Jesus will remain in the tomb? Given this complicated character and his ambiguous status in the Gospel of John, interpreting this passage should highlight these complications and not smooth them out. Nicodemus does not ask for or require

his rescue. His encounter with Jesus and his recurring role in the narrative suggest that believing in Jesus is indeed an ambiguous effort. In the Gospel of John, “faith” is never a noun. Believing for the characters in the Fourth Gospel is a verb (3:15–16) and is subject to all of the ambiguity, uncertainty, and indecisiveness of being human. Having an incarnate God necessitates an incarnational faith: believing is just as complicated as being human.

KAROLINE M. LEWIS

HOMILETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Some texts are so familiar and so loaded with associations that the thought of preaching them *one more time* is almost exhausting. What, you wonder, can you possibly say that has not already been said? It reminds me of a violinist I know who gets a little depressed every November, as she contemplates another season of *The Nutcracker* performances. It is not that she does not love and appreciate the music. It is just that every year she plays the same part in the same way for six weeks straight, and there is only so much innovation one can bring to the third violin section. “I know it’s an orchestra classic that comes with the territory, and I’m glad for the work,” she says, “but I really wish people knew there was more to the repertoire than ‘The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy.’”

John 3:1–21 is the preacher’s equivalent of *The Nutcracker*: a pulpit classic that comes with the territory. Sooner or later we have to deal with its familiar prose, its theological elegance, its pride of place in our historical confessions. We also have a muddle of associations to manage, and that complicates things. The language of being “born again,” and verse 16 in particular (instantly recognizable in its abbreviated form: “John 3:16”), is a staple of highway road signs and bumper stickers and football games. It is shorthand for a certain kind of religious fervor, as people everywhere, Christians and non-Christians alike, can tell you.

This means that before a preacher has any room to do her job, she has to muck out a lot of stalls. She has to name the stereotypes and bad press that this passage evokes so that there is space for us to hear the images afresh. John 3:1–21 may seem like the exclusive property of one brand of Christianity, but the wisdom it offers is for each of us and all of us. On our Lenten journey to the cross, we need it.

Three homiletical tasks in particular present themselves.

Name the Terms. Let us face it: this passage has been used in some pretty awful ways to sort us into groups. “Are you born again?” is code language for, “Are you saved, like us?” or “Are you crazy, like them?” In its insider

mode, it functions as a way to determine a person's salvation as a believer in Jesus Christ. In its outsider mode, it serves as a convenient way to label religious fanatics. Neither version of the question is especially accurate or helpful, because both rely on stereotypes of what it means to be a card-carrying Christian.

So the first thing a preacher has to do is to name how the term "born again" functions in his community, for better or worse: Is this a phrase we use to describe ourselves? Is it a phrase we use to differentiate "us" from "them"? What do we mean by the phrase "born again," and how do our understandings play into stereotypes? How do we decide if a person is "born again"? Who has the power to make that decision? Do our practices bind us together and build up the body of Christ, or do they create separation and conflict? The point, here, is to name your terms and debunk the bunk so that the community can start a conversation.

Shed a Little Light in the Neighborhood. Some artists love the challenge of reinterpreting a tried-and-true classic. Think of the choreographer Mark Morris and his adaptation of *The Nutcracker* (entitled, appropriately, "The Hard Nut"), or the painter Jasper Johns's rendition of the American flag, or Jimi Hendrix's Woodstock performance of the "Star Spangled Banner." Classic texts (or symbols or songs or scores) are classic for a reason: they convey to us a truth that begs to be seen and heard in our own context. That is why actresses memorize Shakespeare and bands play Duke Ellington. You do not need to be brilliant and ahead of your time to do this work. The most important thing is to be *in* your time, right where you are; to be part of your community, rooted in your own context, in the season of Lent; to be a theologian in residence, someone who talks about God from the vantage point of truly *living* somewhere.

So what does "being born" look like where you live? Why would we want the chance to do it again? More accurately, since we cannot birth ourselves, why would we need someone to *bear* us again? Who bears us and bears with us today, and who has borne us in the past? Is this clean work or messy work? How are our bodies and spirits involved? There are hundreds of questions and images to hold up to the light, again and again, to see how they grow in *your* neighborhood.

See the Humor. This text gives us a great foil in Nicodemus: he has already asked all the stupid questions. They are actually very funny questions. We can almost hear Jesus' amusement in verse 10: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?!" We could hear shame

in those words—many have—but humor is often a better motivator than shame.

What if Jesus was exercising a little rabbinical irony instead of divine judgment? It changes our place in the story; suddenly, there is room for *our* ignorance too! Nicodemus reminds us that even the best educated and most authoritative among us are still searching. No sense in clucking over what we fail to understand (and will probably never grasp in its fullness until we see God face to face, as Paul says); better to laugh at our own efforts, and then get up and try again. Wisdom such as this passage offers is mysterious and paradoxical. It begs for a little space—both to be and to laugh.

ANNA CARTER FLORENCE