

Sunday, March 11, 2018
Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year B)
Numbers 21.4-9; John 3.14-21
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As we draw closer to Holy Week, our readings seek to prepare us for what will happen in Jerusalem – Christ’s Passion. Today’s reading from the Gospel according to John is part of a meeting Jesus has with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who comes to Jesus under cover of night to discuss some of Jesus’ intriguing teachings. In the course of their discussion about “being born from above” and other spiritual matters, Jesus gives his first prediction regarding his Passion – “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (Jn 3.14). Jesus then talks about what it means for the Son of Man – his term for himself – to be lifted up. What he reveals is not just about the predicted event, but what it will mean for all humanity. “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” (Jn 3.16).

Undoubtedly – hopefully – you recognize this passage. “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” is probably one of the best known Bible verses. So well-known that its citation, John 3.16, is often used as shorthand instead of reciting the entire verse. So well-known that even many non-Christians know both the verse and its citation.

This single passage is often lifted up as the perfect summation of the Christian faith. In fact, Martin Luther referred to this one verse as “the heart of the Bible, the Gospel in miniature.” Rightly so, as this one verse really does incorporate the central tenets of the Gospel, which itself is the cornerstone of the Christian Bible. But sadly, this one verse has at the same time become such a cliché. A few years ago, it was common to see references to it at sporting events, with signs that merely read “John 3:16.” Professional athletes were notable for referencing it in interviews, while crediting their faith in God as the reason they had won the big game – that God had blessed them for their belief by giving them a win. And it was not uncommon to see younger people with “John 3.16” or even just “3.16” tattooed somewhere on their body. Faith statement or fashion statement?

While I have no reason to question the authenticity of such professions of faith, sadly, John 3.16 has too often been co-opted to be a stick, even a threat, to try to get people to convert to Christianity. Generally, to convert to a particular brand of Christianity. Some, in using this verse as a profession of faith, seek to imply that because Jesus said if you believe in him you will have eternal life, the opposite must also be true. That if you do not believe in him you will not have eternal life. If you don’t believe in Jesus, you are automatically condemned to the fiery pits of Hell. So best be believing in Jesus to avoid eternal damnation. Frankly, a lot of people, myself included, have a hard time with such a rigid and limited perspective of God, of God’s love, of God’s grace. Alas, that perspective is out there and sadly gives a mistaken impression of our God, of our Lord, and of our faith.

After all, John 3.16 should not – cannot – be read in isolation. The verse that follows, verse 17, states that “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3.17). This tells me that the place of profession of faith relative to salvation is, at best, complicated. This tells me that the promise of salvation is not so much about what we do, but about what God has chosen to do for our benefit. That because God loves the world so much – because God loves every single person in the world so much – no one is condemned. That there just might be other means to salvation. I know that may open a whole can of worms for some people. An issue that I am happy to discuss one-on-one. But for the time being, suffice it to say that these two verses, taken together, are meant to provide hope of salvation for the entire world – for a world that is so often filled with darkness. Not to be used to say all people need to be converted and those who are not are condemned. John 3.16 is a promise of salvation, not a threat of damnation.

So how do we redeem this well-known passage? It might be helpful to break down John 3.16 into its component parts. Because there is a lot of meaning packed in these 27 words.

“For God so loved the world” – We need to remember that the Bible is, first and foremost, God’s love story for the world. The Bible is the story of God’s extraordinary love for the world. The Bible is the story of God’s desire to be in relationship with his people. We see, particularly in the Old Testament, that even when we blow it, even when we break God’s laws, even when we are not faithful to the covenant between God and his people, he continually forgives us, bids us to return to that covenant, and welcomes us back into relationship with open arms. We see, particularly in the New Testament, God’s desire to save the entire world. We see this particularly in how the message of God’s love and salvation is extended beyond the Jews to include the Gentiles. In other words, to all people. We see, particularly in the Gospels, how God has chosen to manifest his love for all people, has chosen to bring about salvation for all people, by becoming incarnate, to be with us, face to face, flesh to flesh. From the very first words of Genesis, in which God created humanity to be his special companions, to the ultimate act of salvation through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, we see that all of this has been done for us. For all of us.

“That He gave his only Son” – This second phrase of John 3.16 tells of the extent of God’s love. That out of love, God gave his Son. That God gave his Son in two senses. God gave us his Son in the flesh. In the birth of Jesus to be God incarnate. To be God with us. To be fully human, as we are. To experience life, as we do. Having accomplished that, God gave his Son for us in the ultimate sense. He allowed his Son to be given up for us through his death. An act that, even for God, was the supreme sacrifice. But that is how much he loves us. That he was willing to make that painful sacrifice to provide for the salvation of each and every one of us, accomplished through Christ’s death. And redeemed through his resurrection.

As I noted earlier, this passage is Jesus’ first prediction of his Passion. The first revelation of how the salvation God promises will come about. Through the journey that we share and witness during Holy Week – Jesus’ arrest, trial, torture, and death. As we make this journey with him, we see that the giving of God’s Son is not clean. That it entailed a particularly messy and painful death. The most horrific means of death ever devised by humanity. And even so, God was willing to give his Son in this way for the very humanity that devised such evil. Again, a

testament to just how much God loves us, how much God forgives us, how much God is willing to suffer for the sake of our salvation.

“So that everyone who believes in him” – This phrase of John 3.16 switches the action from God to us. To believe is to accept, to buy into the program. In believing, we are believing not only in the person of Jesus, but also accepting what he has accomplished on our behalf. Believing is more than just a mental assent to certain propositional statements. In John’s Gospel, to believe is always an action verb. For John, believing requires obedience. We are called to be obedient to God’s revelation of himself in Jesus and all that entails. Not just the incarnation of God in human form in a manger at Bethlehem. But also his Passion. Believing, being obedient, entails a willingness to follow no matter what. Including the denying of self that we so often talk about during the Lenten season. Believing is our participation in the events of Jesus’ life, Passion, and death. Not that we actually perform the horrific acts of the Passion. But that we acknowledge and accept that what happened in Jerusalem was done for our benefit. That we acknowledge and accept that what happened was a sign of God’s love. That we acknowledge and accept God’s act of unbounded and unmerited love for us.

“May not perish but may have eternal life” – This final phrase of John 3.16 carries the implicit acknowledgment that we humans are mortal, not meant to live forever. But at the same time, belief in Jesus, belief and acceptance of what was accomplished through the gift of God’s Son, brings not sorrow or shame or guilt, but brings the promise of eternal life. Eternal life is life lived in the presence of God. That means that eternal life is not just about quantity – living forever. It is also about quality – how we live this earthly life. How we choose to follow God’s commandments, particularly to love God and to love others, in this earthly life. Jesus is not just promising something in the unknown future, but is also promising a new and improved life, here and now, with him by our side.

John 3.16 presents the “why” of Jesus’ life and death. That his life and death are an expression of God’s vast love for us. That Jesus came to us in the flesh so that God himself could be with us in human form, experiencing life – and death – as we experience it. That Jesus died so that we might be saved, that we might not just be with God in this life, but that we will be with God forever.

How this occurs is summed up in the opening verses of today’s Gospel, the set-up for John 3.16. “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” (Jn 3.14-15). In this statement, Jesus is referencing our Old Testament reading from Numbers. But he is implying a significant difference. In the wilderness, when Moses fashioned a serpent on a pole, it was so the people who had been bitten by serpents could look on the serpent image, be healed, and live. In the Gospel, Jesus tells us that the Son of Man is lifted up as a model of healing for the people. That believing in him is also believing in the healing power of Jesus. That Jesus nailed to the cross gives healing and life. The significant difference from the serpent on the pole is that Son of Man on the cross does not just save life. He gives eternal life.

Our Gospel for this Sunday is meant to turn our gaze to the cross in such a way that we can see our own healing lifted up on it. This image of the cross serves as a reminder of the ultimate goal

of Lent: to prepare us for the deep healing that comes through the death of God's Beloved Son. The cross as the ultimate manifestation of God's love. The ultimate means of healing. It is incredibly hard to see this on Good Friday as we stand with Mary and John at foot of cross. But it is absolutely evident come Easter morning. For God so loved the world.