

God SO loved...
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Our scripture this morning comes from the gospel of John, a book wholly unlike the other three gospels. In John, Jesus isn't born in a manger but is with God from the beginning of the creation of the world. The gospel of John is rich with symbolism in it. Jesus always seems to speak of spiritual things while those around him interpret his words literally. In the gospel, Jesus also speaks in contrasts to make his point, light and dark, believe and not believe, doing what is evil or what is true.

The third chapter of John begins as the Pharisee Nicodemus, leader of the Jews, comes to Jesus at night, recognizing Jesus as a teacher straight from God, and he's curious. What follows is an intimate conversation, filled with theological significance and packed with symbolism. Jesus uses the image of light and darkness to illustrate the gospel. Jesus tells him he must be born from above in order to receive new life. Like any of us faced with a seemingly impossible riddle, Nicodemus is confused and asks how it's possible to go back into the womb as a grown man. See? Literal and spiritual truths.

No, no, not physically, Jesus tells him, but born again of spirit, that wild, untamed Spirit that has the power to change the world.

Jesus says that spiritual birth is something you can't touch or see. A little like the wind, invisible until you observe the silver green shimmer of the Aspen leaves on a spring day or feel the cool on your cheeks on a sticky summer night.

And the conversation continues on in verses 14–21, as Jesus says,

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. “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. “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. Those 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. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But 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.” AMEN

The text begins with a play on the words “lifted up” as Jesus refers to a story that his listeners would have known, an account of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness found in Numbers 21 (4–9). Wandering in the wilderness, the people are impatient, despairing. They don’t know how they will be able to survive without food and water and they complain to God and Moses.

Then, serpents appear, bite the people, killing some of them. Pretty gruesome stuff. On seeing this, others repented, and Moses goes to God in prayer. God tells Moses to take a stick, put a bronze serpent on it and raise it high up. Those who had been bit can then look upon the snake and will not die but will live.

Just as the people of Israel looked upon the snake, and lived, Jesus says that he, “the son of man” will be lifted up, high on a cross, ascended into heaven, and that those who look upon Jesus and believe will live as well. The eternal life to which Jesus refers is not only life after death, but also refers a quality of life lived in the presence of God in the here and now. A life with a richness and fullness that is born of relationship and forgiveness and love.

Next comes perhaps the most recognized Bible verse of all time. John 3:16. We see hand-painted on signs at sporting events, see it crossed stitched on pillows, and hung on walls. The reformer Martin Luther calls this short passage the gospel in a nutshell. I’ll bet many, if not all, of us could recite it, or some form of it.

And right here I’ll admit that for me, seeing those signs often creates more anxiety than it does solace. It makes me a little bit uncomfortable to think of faith being reduced to a single sentence or a formula that some seem to get right, and others are left out in the cold. I wonder how Jesus would feel about his words plastered on someone’s chest at a football game. It felt good to dig a little deeper into the verse.

For God SO loved...

The word “so” as it is used here is not meant to convey a large amount, as in, I love pizza so much, or I am so sorry about that. It is better translated as “in this way” or the more antiquated, “thusly.” Jesus says that God loved the world, the whole broken, beautiful mess, in this way, that God’s very self became one of us. We tend to think of the incarnation a lot at Christmas time, but in this Lenten season, it’s a good reminder that as we wander in the wilderness of grief, illness, surgeries, broken relationships, political divides, God’s very self walked this earth and experienced it all. God didn’t just create the world dispassionately, but deeply desires relationship, and thriving for all. And still does.

For God so loved the WORLD...

The word world here is not just human beings but is translated as “cosmos” as in everything. Every blade of grass, every animal, each planet, every ocean and pond, every person, even the ones we don’t like or agree with. God’s salvation is for it all. It is the most expansive and inclusive concept we can imagine, it blows my mind, and perhaps the most theologically sound rationale to work to save a planet that is on fire.

That whoever BELIEVES...

We often think of the believing as giving our intellectual assent to a proposition or theory or idea. But that isn’t what Jesus is getting at here, and it doesn’t make sense in the context of the text, and it certainly doesn’t ring true in the person of Jesus, who healed and forgave, who fed and performed miracles without condition, simply out of love.

One way to interpret the word believe here is to trust. It is so human to think that we can do this life-thing all by ourselves. To go it alone. Or we turn our striving to become disciples into something competitive and discouraging, as in, I don’t pray enough, or read the Bible enough, etc.. I think that we sometimes forget that God has already taken the first action toward us and returns to us again and again and again. Building trust in a relationship takes time, as we ourselves practice turning to a gracious God over and again. We learn to trust that which bears love.

Pastor Jonathan Davis, in a blog, questions whether we’ve gotten these famous texts wrong. He says that maybe they are less about the right way to be or how we can get a ticket to heaven, or understand something, but rather are designed to upend what we think we understand and unsettle us with the result of returning to the arms of God who bears with us and bears us over and over.

And that is more about what faith looks like.

Theologian Marcus Borg says that to believe is to be-love. To love what God loves, to live into that love, to let our hearts break for the things that break God's heart.

Friends, there are people in the world that do not trust or accept that they are loved, and that is a painful place to be, it feels like condemnation. As a church, the theological truth of the belovedness of this world is our call as it relates to every ministry here, from Sunday School classes to our volunteer fair, to Wednesday night dinners, to political action at the capital.

Shall not perish but have eternal life.

As I mentioned earlier, this isn't just a pie-in-the-sky-by and by verse, but Jesus shows us a quality of life lived in relationship with God that is full and rich.

Let's remember that we simply cannot pull any scripture out of context, so John 3:16 must be read with verse 17, God sent Jesus not to condemn the world, but to save it. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, who dealt with the snakes, judgement is not the last word. Love is the last word. Love wins. If love isn't winning, then the story is not over yet.

Our text ends with the symbols of light and darkness. We are well aware of the dangers of equating light with goodness and darkness with sin. We need to be very careful about our language. Beautiful things are nurtured and come to life in darkness. Remember that in our chapter today Jesus meets Nicodemus in the cover of night, sharing the good news. In that story, the darkness becomes like a womb, with Jesus nurturing the Pharisee to be birthed to new life.

In Jesus, the truth of who we are can come clearly to our attention, like turning on a light in a dark room. In the light of Christ, we can see the contrasts in our lives, and the truth of who we are in the light of God's love, a love that is always searching, seeking for us and longs for us to live with abundance.

I want to share a story I heard this week that I can't stop thinking about. I think it illustrates the way that Christ's light can upend our assumptions and bring clarity to our lives in simple and profound ways.

A friend of mine who has a severely compromised immune system because of cancer took a flight last month to see her sick father. Because of her medical situation, she wore a mask, one of the very few people on the plane who were masking. She found her seat and was settling in, wondering who her seat partner would be, just as she saw a man walking toward her who she quickly assumed (based on his clothes, hat, inking and demeanor) to be someone with whom she would have profound political disagreement. She formed a snap judgement, for sure. When he sat next to her, she thought, "Oh, great."

He looked at her and said, "I see you are wearing a mask." "Uh-oh," she thought. But she responded, "Yes, I'm compromised, and my doctor says it's the best plan to keep me healthy." To her surprise, this man replied, "Oh, okay. Hold on, I'll get my mask on, it's in my bag."

My friend shared how moved she felt by this gesture and experienced a true human connection to a stranger. It was the first time she had ever had someone mask because she was masking. In the light of Christ's love, her judgement on this person was exposed, then torn apart in this act of kindness and grace.

As we journey closer to the passion of Jesus this Lenten season, may we fully, truly, overwhelmingly, courageously accept the mystery and magnitude of God's gracious love, who gave us Jesus, who was with God in the beginning and continues with us still.

May it be so.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN

Sources:

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