

March 22, 2009

Scripture: John 3: 14-21

Sermon: "Come to the Light"

We continue our travel to Jerusalem with the Gospel of John as our guide. We realize that with each step, with each passing Sunday, with each weekly reading from the Gospels, we are one step closer to Jerusalem. We notice that the shadow of the cross is no longer and closer. We can begin to start to make the rough wood of the cross. We can begin to feel the heavy burden of sadness in our hearts as we get closer and closer to the cross.

It is at this point, the midway point, of our journey when our resolve to complete this journey begins to falter. It is at this point, the halfway point that our courage seems to disappear. The cross all of a sudden becomes too real. The task before seems too great. The emotions seem too much to bear.

It is at this point, the midway point, of our journey, that we need words of encouragement to continue our journey to Jerusalem, to continue to our journey to the cross, to continue our journey of self-discovery and of faith.

And that is what exactly what we get from the Gospel of John today. We get a word of encouragement. We get a word of hope. We get a word of love.

And it is the heart of the Gospel for John: "For God so loved the world, that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life." A word of hope. A word of encouragement. A word of love.

Unfortunately, we have become so familiar with this message that its' power, its impact become lost and we have allowed this amazing message to become mundane. Along the roadside, we see a simple sign that says: John 3:16. We take a look at it and think, "For God so loved the world..." And the rest of the passage falls off as we continue driving down the highway at 70 miles per hour.

And at sporting events, I have seen people hold up a sign that says: John 3: 16. And I have to admit, my first thought is not about God's love for the world. My first thought is what does John 3:16 have to do with sports? I am thinking about who is winning the game. I am thinking about my team crushing the other team. And I have to admit, God's love for the world is the last thing I am thinking about at a sporting event.

Unfortunately, we have gotten so used to seeing this message in our lives, on street corners, on signposts that its impact is lost on us. Unfortunately, even in our churches, we have turned this verse into simple memorization for a prize that it has lost its power and has almost become just another verse. Unfortunately, we have allowed this verse to become so mundane and familiar that its life-changing, life-giving message disappears and has become just background noise.

For us to once again empower this Scripture and to really feel its impact on us as people of faith, we must take a look at it in its context. This verse is part of a larger section that involves Nicodemus and Jesus. If you remember, Nicodemus came to Jesus one night and said, "I believe in you because of the amazing signs that show you are the Son of God." Jesus, in response, to this statement, tries to get Nicodemus to understand that the Kingdom of God is not about signs.

It is not about miracles. It is not about having the right kind of knowledge. Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand that the Kingdom of God is about belief. And so Jesus tries all different images and concepts to get Nicodemus to understand that belief in the Son of God comes from a life-giving experience with God, belief in the Son of God comes from trusting in the promises of God, belief in the Son of God comes from stepping out of the darkness of doubt and into the light of love and salvation.

Belief in the Son of God is an invitation to come into the light and experience eternal life.

But Nicodemus still doesn't understand so Jesus says, "Okay, let's try this one. Do you remember the story about when the people of Israel were in the desert and they were complaining? And in response to their complaining, they were bitten by poisonous snakes. And what happened? The people asked Moses to pray on their behalf to God to save them. So Moses went to God and prayed on their behalf and God told Moses make a bronze snake and lift it high in the camp. That way, all who would look upon the snake would be healed. They would be restored.

Well, that is what has to happen now. The Son of Man has to be lifted up so that all who look upon him and believe in him will be healed. They would be restored. They would have eternal life.

God loves this world so much that God came down to earth-The Word made Flesh, took on the image of humanity, and is once again saving the world by being lifted high.

It is a play on words-The Son of Man will be lifted up on a cross and through his death, he will be lifted up in exaltation!

Nicodemus, do you get it? Here is the Gospel in a nutshell: God loves the world so much that God would send God's own son to save the world. God would go through the pain, the suffering, the despair to save this world. That is how much God loves this broken, sinful, dejected world. This world that would rather stay in the darkness than step into the light. This world that would rather in sin than step into the light and experience the new life found through the Son of God! This world that would rather stay in darkness as broken people because they are too afraid to trust in their Lord God.

That is how much God loves this world! And it is a love that knows no end, knows no boundaries, and knows no conditions.

It is up to this world whether or not they will accept this gift. God did not send the Son to judge, but that is what is going to happen simply by the people failing to see and step into the light.

God has offered another way for God's people to live in the presence of God now, to live a life as the people that God created them to be, to live a life filled with the peace and grace of God. It is up to the people to accept this gift.

That is the word of hope that Jesus brings. That is the word of encouragement that Jesus brings. That is the word of love that Jesus brings for the people of God then and now.

Now that is a powerful thought. God took on the cross. God took on the pain and suffering. God took on the despair because God loved this world so much that God could not let sin have the

last word. God could not not offer another way for God's children. God could not let God's people sit in the darkness any more. God wanted to do something to bring healing to God's people. God wanted to do something to restore the people of God to life once more. God wanted to do something to let the people experience new life.

Our God is not a presence millions of miles away, watching us without acting. Our God is not a hands-off God. Our God is didn't just create the world and then walk away, leaving us on our own to suffer and despair.

No our God is a God who gets right down in the middle of it all. Our God is a God who holds us in the palms of his hands. Our God is a God who wraps God's arms of comfort and peace around us. Our God is a God who bears the pain of the cross, just for us, to give us new life.

What a humbling thought. What an encouraging thought. What a hope filled thought.

What an invitation for us as people of faith. We have been given new life. All we have to do is step out of the darkness and into the light to receive this new life. We admit that this is A scary thought because by doing this it will show all our faults. It will show all of our deeds, good and bad. It will shine the light on who we really are. And we are very uncomfortable with that experience. We don't really want to show our imperfections. We are uneasy with this idea because we are vulnerable. Not something we really like to be in life!

But here is the good news: We can take that first step because God loved us so much that God sent God's own son to take away our sin, to take away the darkness, and to restore the brokenness of our relationships. God loves us so much that being vulnerable doesn't matter! God loves us so much that we can face our faults, our deeds, our real selves without fear!

And once we have stepped into the light, we are in the unending presence of God. And what a place to be!

As we continue our Lenten journey and get one step closer to the cross, we can look upon the cross without fear. We can step into the light and expose things that we "might prefer to remain hidden" because Jesus invites "to look at the cross and see that he has taken all our darkness upon him, and in doing so, healed us."

What a humbling thought. What an empowering thought. What a hope-filled thought.

May we have the strength and the courage to come to light and experience new life through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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