

Lent 4B, 2009

Text: John 3:14-21

Title: Good News

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“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

If you know one Bible verse by heart, it’s probably this one (or maybe “Jesus wept”). In the late 1970s and 1980s, a man named Rollen Stuart made this verse popular by holding up signs at sporting events that only gave the reference “John 3:16.”

John 3:16 is called “the gospel in a nutshell”, because it is such a helpful summary of the gospel.

Now the gospel is what we’re all about. That’s what the “Evangelical” in Faith *Evangelical* Lutheran Church stands for. We’re a gospel church. Here the gospel is read and preached. Here the gospel is experienced in Holy Baptism and tasted in the Lord’s Supper. Here the gospel is sung in hymns, and the gospel is lived out in lives of service.

So we’re going to take a few minutes to unpack this gospel this morning.

This may be one of the most familiar verses in the Bible to you, but listen to it again. You can never get too much of the gospel. You can never get too much good news. Every day you get beaten up by the world. You get discouraged. You’re stepped on and pushed out of the way. You’re tired of all the bad news.

So you’re here this morning for some good news. You are here to hear that all is not lost, that love is still alive, and that God has something better in store for you.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

The first person to hear these words was an old man named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was an important man. He was a member of the Jewish council. He had lived a long life, and Nicodemus figured he had seen and heard it all. He had seen politicians come and go. He had seen rebels and revolutionaries come and go.

It was all very familiar. When you’ve been around awhile, you tend not to get excited by each new young face on the scene. Sooner or later their greed or their ego would get the best of them. Sooner or later the fickle crowd would abandon them. Sooner or later the Romans would intervene and put a stop to things. It was a predictable cycle.

But there was something different about this new young rabbi from Jerusalem. At 30 years old, he was half Nicodemus' age. But He spoke like someone wiser beyond His years. And He did signs that no ordinary man could do. He was different.

But Nicodemus was afraid. He was too embarrassed to come to Jesus publicly. And so He arranges this late night meeting to get some answers.

And Jesus gives Nicodemus answers, just not the answers he was expecting. Nicodemus knew that God was with Jesus. He just did not realize that Jesus was God Himself.

First Jesus talks about being born again. Nicodemus doesn't get it. He can't imagine going through birth a second time as an old man.

So Jesus tries to make things simpler. Being born again means being born of the Spirit, and not flesh and blood, He says. Nicodemus still doesn't get it.

And so Jesus makes things as simple as He can for Nicodemus. He uses a story from the Old Testament about Moses and the snakes. Jesus says, "That's me. That story is all about me. Just like the snake was lifted up, I will be lifted up to give people life."

And then Jesus speaks to Nicodemus clearly and directly. He lays everything out for Nicodemus. He gives him the good news, the gospel, the Word of Salvation.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

It begins with God. "For God so loved the world..."

God was there in the beginning. Everything starts with Him. Genesis 1, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." John 1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

The gospel doesn't start by us loving God, or us deciding to change our lives around. The gospel starts with God. God makes the first move.

And that first move is a move of love. "For God so loved the world..." God is love. That's who He is, that's what He does. God is love. Everything He does for us is out of love.

If you want to know what true love is, if you want to know what love looks like, don't look to the poets, or the romance novelists. Don't turn on the TV to the latest reality show- the Bachelor, who wants to marry a millionaire, or whatever the latest gimmick happens to be.

Our love is tainted by selfishness. We look first to satisfying our own needs.

If you want to see true love, look to the cross. There you will see love. “What wondrous love is this, O my soul, that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse.” “Greater love has no man than this, that He lay down His life for His friends.”

Here, in this place is where true love is now at work. You see love whenever the sign of the cross is made. You hear love when the words of forgiveness are spoken. You taste love when the body and blood of Jesus are placed on your tongue and flow from the chalice. If you’re looking for love, it is here, every week for you.

“God loved the world...”

Love desires an object. Despite what the therapists say, you cannot love yourself. Love comes to you from someone else. Love flows from you to someone else.

God created the world in order to love it. He created you as someone for Him to love. There was love in the beginning, as love flowed from Father to Son and from both to the Spirit. But love is always more, and this threefold, eternal love made, He made the world for them to love.

But with true love there is always the possibility of rejection. True love cannot be forced. In loving we make ourselves vulnerable. And this is what God did. He loved us in a way that does not force us to love Him back. God opens Himself up and allows Himself to be rejected.

And we rejected the love of God. We turned from His love to love of other things, other gods. God’s people are like an unfaithful wife, who rejects His love and cheats on Him with others. We look for satisfaction and pleasure in other places.

But God does not stop loving. God continues to love us, even when we refused to love Him.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave...”

God is a giver. Salvation is a gift. It’s not a contract- He does His part and we do ours. It’s not something we could earn. It is a free gift.

Have you ever received the perfect gift? Sometimes we get things that we need, but we don’t really want. I remember as a child checking the Christmas gifts as they arrived. Those that rattled, were a little heavier, or in an interesting shape were probably toys, while those that were lighter, didn’t rattle and were in the typical rectangular box were likely to be clothes. Now the toys were the more exciting gifts, the clothes the more practical ones. I wanted the toys, but I needed the clothes.

Sometimes we get things we like, sometimes we get things we need, but rarely do we receive that perfect gift: Something that we want, something that we can use, something that fits us and our personality, something generous beyond expectation, a gift that we never could have imagined, and when we receive it we can’t stop giving thanks for it.

God loved us and out of that love He gave us a gift. The gift was His own Son. There is nothing more precious, more costly, more perfect than this gift.

When God gave His Son, He was giving Himself. We are all children of God by adoption. But He gave us Jesus Christ, His true Son, begotten before all worlds.

We tend to give gifts at Christmas time. That's a fine practice, but the best day to give gifts may be Good Friday, when the Father gave His Son and the Son gave His life for us.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him...”

Faith is not complicated. It is looking to Jesus for salvation, and receiving this perfect gift from the Father.

Just like in the Old Testament reading, those who looked to the snake were healed, and so looking to Jesus we find our healing. Hebrews 12:2 reads, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Looking to Jesus we see the love of God and His perfect gift. Looking to Jesus we see all of our sins dying there on the cross. Jesus bore all of our sins. Jesus was made to be a snake for us. Jesus was lifted up on the cross for us. Trust in Jesus, knowing that in Him you are saved.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

We are all in danger of perishing. Just like the Israelites in the wilderness, we are surrounded by snakes, poisonous deadly snakes. The snakes of worry and greed and selfishness and laziness, the snakes of pride and lust and anger all surround us. They bite us, injecting their poison deep inside of us and it is only a matter of time until we die.

The only solution, the only cure for these snakebites is to look to the cross, to the one who is lifted up. Looking to Him, trusting in Him, we have that new life that we need.

The gospel leads to life, life that lasts forever. God loved you, God gave His Son for you, so that you would have life. You have everlasting life, life together with His and all the redeemed because of what He has done for you.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

This is the good news. This is the gospel. You will not hear this anywhere else. This is what makes us who we are as the church of God. This is what we are all about. This is what gives us hope and strength, even when the snakes surround us.