

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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“We Love the Dark”

John 3:14-21 (NRSV)

[14] And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] that 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.

[18] 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.

[19] 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. [20] For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

[21] 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."

SNAKE BIT

Have you been “snake bit”? No, I’m not asking if you’ve had a dangerous encounter with a timber rattler. In the place where I come from the phrase “snake bit” refers to someone who “if it weren’t for bad luck they’d have no luck at all.” Everything they touch turns to dust.

I’ll use it in a sentence so you know what I mean. The way things have been going with the economy recently it seems like all of us have been snake bit. Everything we’ve tried seems to have gone terribly wrong. If it weren’t for bad luck we’d have no luck at all.

Every time I hear that phrase it reminds me of a story in the Bible.

God’s people, the children of Israel had been rescued from slavery in Egypt. And now they were in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. But, the trip was longer than they expected, a whole generation longer. Because of their unbelief the Israelites had to wander in the wilderness for forty long years until all those who doubted God’s grace had died.

Sometimes it takes the death of a generation before something new can happen. And now except for Moses, Joshua and Caleb there was a whole new generation in charge.

And what did they do?

They did exactly what their mothers and fathers before them had done. They mistrusted the grace of God. They spoke against God and Moses. They asked, “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.” Numbers 21:5 (NRSV)

Even though God had delivered his people from the hand of their enemies on numerous occasions and had given them manna from heaven it wasn't enough. They complained. And as punishment for their complaints they were snake bit. The Bible tells us that poisonous serpents came among the people and some even died from their snake bites.

In their pain and desperation the people were ready to repent. They said to Moses, “We have sinned. Please, ask God to take away these poisonous serpents.”

But, God didn't do that. Instead, God instructed Moses to make a serpent out of brass, put it on a pole and tell this snake bitten people, “Look up at the bronze serpent, and you will live.”

A SYMBOL OF OUR SIN AND DARKNESS

Now the stories of the Bible operate on more than one level. This is not just a story about some ancient people struggling to make their way through the snake infested wilderness. This is also a story about our sin and how we refuse to trust God's grace in our wilderness.

Instead of focusing on all that God has done to deliver us in the past we ungratefully ask, “What have you done for me lately God?” We put God (and sometimes God's servants) on trial. Seldom do we dare to consider the fact that perhaps we are still in the wilderness because of our own unfaithfulness. We have chosen the path we take with our own actions.

To use another biblical metaphor, we are often in the dark. John tells us from the very beginning of his gospel that Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness. He is the light of the world. But we prefer to be in the dark. We love the dark. We love the dark because our deeds are evil, and we don't want light shining on those dark deeds. John 3:19

We hide the hard truth from ourselves. We blame our problems on others while excusing or ignoring our own bad behavior. The results can be catastrophic.

I wonder how many of our current financial problems came from people who hide just a few things. And then when no one noticed they made a few more surreptitious self-serving decisions. And before you knew it everyone was doing it, and the whole financial basis for the free world was put at risk.

Keeping things in the dark can be dangerous. Keeping things in the dark can keep us in the wilderness.

So what is the answer?

LOOK TO THE CROSS

The answer is light. The answer is to tell the truth and put our sins on a pole for all to see. The answer is to name the sin; name the serpent that has stung us, and then look up at God's salvation instead of looking about at our own desires and temptations.

Jesus said that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so the Son of Man must be lifted up so "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Jesus is referring to his being lifted up on the cross, and he is saying that the cross is similar to the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness.

What's the connection?

The bronze serpent was a symbol of sin and punishment. When the people looked up at the serpent it was a way of confessing their sin and trusting God for their salvation.

In the same way when we see Jesus lifted up on the cross he is a symbol of our sin.

As we mentioned last week, it's not just about what people did back then and there. It's also about what we do here and now.

The cross is a symbol of our fundamental rejection of God's grace and salvation. God loved the world so much that he sent his son into the world. And what did we do? We crucified him. We condemned ourselves through our rejection of him.

THE NATURE OF GOD

But, the good news, the gospel is this: our unfaithfulness does not change the gracious nature of God. Instead of the cross being the final symbol of our damnation it has become through the grace of God a symbol of our salvation.

Some people have called John 3:16 the gospel in a nutshell. I had it memorized by the time I was six years old. It was a good choice.

The heart of God is not condemnation. The heart of God is love. "God loved the world so much that he sent his only son into the world that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

The word translated "world" is the Greek word "kosmos." The love and salvation of God is just as broad and expansive as that word suggests.

And God's purpose (according to John 3:17) is not to condemn the world but that the world (the kosmos) through him might be saved.

JUDGMENT

Now people always want to know after they read that verse, “Surely this doesn’t mean that everyone will be saved?”

It doesn’t.

The next verses say that some people condemn themselves because they reject the hard truth about themselves, the truth that is revealed in Jesus Christ. They love darkness instead of the light. They insist on doing it their way. And their way leads to destruction.

I saw an interview recently of a retired actress who lost much of her fortune because she invested her money with Bernie Madoff. She said that she was just about to invest another \$100,000 with him before his Ponzi scheme was uncovered.

But, to her credit she wasn’t bitter. She wasn’t angry at Madoff whom she knew personally. When asked if she had the opportunity to say something to him what would she say? And she replied, “I would ask, ‘Bernie, why did you do this to yourself?’”

We are all mad at Madoff because he represents the kind of excess that has caused so much turmoil in our country. But, the actress’ answer was astute. In the end he destroyed himself. He chose a secret path that inevitably led to his destruction and the destruction of many others.

Madoff’s sins are very public and have great financial and personal repercussions. But, in a way his life is a good symbol of what happens in every life. One sin leads to another until we find ourselves in the wilderness of sin with the serpents of Satan chomping at our heels.

SALVATION

But, in a much greater way the life, death and resurrection of Christ represent a counter force that will eventually win the victory. God’s ability to save is stronger than our tendency to self-destruct!

The Bible reminds us that “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8

To put another way, the love of God is not contingent upon our faith. God doesn’t say I’ll love you if you believe these four things. God doesn’t say I’ll love you if you join the church or anything else.

God loves us while we are still sinners. God is not out to get anybody!

Jenny McDevitt wrote that when she served as the program director for a summer camp, the campers had to learn a memory verse each morning. They would recite the verse together before entering the dining hall for lunch.

One morning she was approached by a particularly bouncy child. She asked if he knew the verse. He said “yes” and that proceeded to say it,
 “ForGodsolovedtheworldhesenthisonly . . .” He continued at top speed, each word running into the next.

Jenny quite naturally asked him if he knew what all that meant. And he replied, “Of course I know. It means I get to have lunch!”

In a way he was exhibit A for the fact that we need to teach meaning and context as well as memorize. But, in his childish exuberance, he was right as well.

This familiar text is an invitation by God. Among other things this text assures us that we get to have lunch. We are given a seat at the heavenly banquet which begins here and now in the unending presence of God.

ACCEPTING THE INVITATION

But, love is not coercive. God does not force feed us. God will not force us to love him back. We have to accept the invitation.

This past week someone graciously sent me an invitation to celebrate a wedding anniversary. There will be a meal and dancing afterward. It sounds like a whole lot of fun. Those who know me know that I’m always ready to party!

But, in order to enjoy the benefits of that party I had to do one thing. I had to accept the invitation. No one forces you to attend a party. They invite you to attend out of love.

In a much greater way God in Christ is inviting us to the greatest party the universe has ever known. In the book of Revelation it is known as the wedding feast of the lamb. Revelation 19:7

People will come from the East, the West, the North and the South to attend this banquet..
 Luke 13:29

But, not everyone who is invited will attend.

A story is told about an unwilling teen who accompanied his class members on a visit to one of Europe’s great art museums during a summer vacation trip. When the tour was over, the young man said to the guide, just to make sure others knew where he was coming from,

“I didn’t think it was so great. Just a lot of old pictures.”

Quickly, the guide responded. “The works of art in this museum are no longer on trial, but those who come here to see them are.”

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That's surely also true for us who are confronted by God's love in Christ. If we see no hope in the promise of our text that whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life, then our judgment comes from ourselves, not from God.

As Jesus says, "whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

WHO WILL BE SAVED?

At this point we all have inquiring minds. We want to know. We want to know who will be and can be saved.

We ask: "What about people of other religions? What about those who have been raised to believe a certain way in a country where no other faith is permitted? Will they be invited to the heavenly feast? What about those who have led a righteous life, but have just never felt the urge to join a church?"

What many of us are really asking is:

"What about my brother who doesn't believe? What about my mother who died without making a profession of faith? What about my best friend who is of another faith? Can they be saved? Will they be saved?"

You might not like my final answer! God knows, and we don't.

But, perhaps I can give you some help with this sticky question. Whenever I do a funeral for a person who was not a person of faith, it's often a person whom I have not known.

As you might imagine this is a very difficult situation. But, if someone has asked a Christian minister to do the service there are surely people in that audience who are asking these very difficult questions about faith and salvation.

What I always do is have some friends and family say some things about the deceased. And then when it's my turn I say something like, "Thank you for sharing those stories. I wish I could have known that person. But, as a Christian minister I want to tell you about the Lord and Savior that I do know."

And then I share this message. The God revealed in Jesus is a God of love, compassion and forgiveness. God is not out to get you. God is out to save you. Whatever regrets you have about the past and whatever fears you have about the future I invite you to give them over to the grace of God as revealed in the life of his Son, Jesus Christ.

To put it another way in the final analysis we trust not in our own righteousness or our orthodox theology or anything else. We trust wholly and completely in the character of God as revealed in Jesus. It's not my call who gets into heaven, but I do know from the stories of Jesus that God is a lot more gracious and forgiving than I could ever be.

A SURPRISE PARTY

There are also many passages in the Bible that suggest the heavenly banquet will be something of a surprise party. Not everyone who uses the name of Jesus will be part of the heavenly party.

Matthew 7:21

And Jesus also said that he had “other sheep” that are not of his fold. John 10:16

Jesus had his greatest conflicts with those who were religious leaders. In some cases his own people didn't know him because they didn't have eyes to see. In another instance Jesus even said that if “his people” didn't want to come to the heavenly banquet God would round up some others off the street to go in their place. Luke 14:16-24

Whenever the Bible talks about religious leaders, the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Jews, or his own people, substitute the phrase “good church people.” In other words we who strive to follow Jesus and want to be faithful are prone to sin, the sin of self-righteousness.

Remember the background for this passage. Nicodemus, the Pharisee and a leader of the Jews came to Jesus by night. Nicodemus came by night because he was afraid to be seen with Jesus. And Nicodemus also came to Jesus by night because he was “in the dark” about the kingdom of God.

When Jesus suggested that no one could see the kingdom of God without being born again or born from above, Nicodemus didn't understand. He was a religious leader, but he had missed the kingdom that was coming in Jesus. I take this passage as a warning for me first of all as a religious leader and also a warning for all who would dare to call themselves Christian.

I guess we could summarize the message for us in the words of an old gospel hymn. How does it go? Something like, “Not my brother not my sister but it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.”

When we talk about the darkness, we speak primarily about ourselves and our need to repent. Just as God's people looked up at the symbol of their sin in the wilderness in order to be saved so we are called once again to look to the cross. We look to Calvary where our sins are on display and where our salvation is on display as well.

We do love our darkness. But, God loves us too much to leave us in our darkness. Once again we make our Lenten journey toward Jerusalem. We look to the cross “high and lifted up” a symbol of suffering and shame and a symbol of salvation.

Amen.