

**“People Loved the Darkness “**

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John 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> “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.

<sup>17</sup> “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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup> 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.”

## JOHN 3:16

Today’s lesson contains the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16. Believe it or not I had it memorized when I was six years old ...in the Old English of the KJV no less.

No matter where you go you see John 3:16.

It’s printed on shopping bags.

It’s on posters at football games.

There are vanity license plates embossed with John 3:16.

When I was a teenager, there was a very recognizable character who carried a John 3:16 sign to golf tournaments.

Not only did he have the sign; he also had a rainbow colored Afro.

And in order to attract attention he would move his head back and forth as he waved the sign.

(That gave your color TV a real test, not to mention the golfers who were trying to win a tournament.)

John 3:16

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

But, even the most famous verse in the Bible can be misinterpreted, and trivialized by the man in the rainbow colored Afro, if we take it out of context.

We think that we know what this verse means.  
But, maybe not.

For example, the verse says, “God loved the world.”

So, does mean that all will be saved?

Just how inclusive is that word “world”?

Verse 17 seems to suggest the word is very inclusive.

It reads that God didn't sent his son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

And yet in the very next verse, verse 18 seems to suggest that maybe salvation is not so universal after all.

Those who believe are not condemned.

But, those who have not believed in Jesus?  
Condemned already.

Yes, God's Son came into the world to save the world. But, the world?

Not ready for a Savior.

In verse 19 we read that the people loved their darkness.

After all, the darkness covers their sin.

The light of God as revealed in Jesus was just too much to bear.

The light of God as revealed in Jesus shined a light on those things that people would rather ignore.

## THE DARK WORLD

We talked about this last week.

The gospel is complicated.

And it's complicated precisely because the gospel is that place where the light of God's salvation meets the darkness of sin and evil.

Yes there is salvation, but there is also conflict and judgment.

This story is much too complex to be told on a bumper sticker, a placard at a football game, a bumper sticker or even a tweet.

And yet the whole complex story, the story that includes the cosmic struggle against the principalities and the powers ...is precisely the message we need most to hear in our day and time.

People may not worry as much about eternity as they used to.

But, they do worry about the darkness that seems to surround us.

The places that used to seem secure are not so secure any more.

Remember when we didn't have to lock our homes?

Remember when we didn't need a department of Homeland Security?

Remember when we walked to school and school was the safest place in town?

Many of us do.

But, not so today.

It seems like we have to constantly worry

about those who use the darkness to hide their evil deeds and wreak havoc on our world.

Bad news comes faster than ever before.  
I wear the bearer of bad news on my belt.  
My phone.

The news feed on my phone brings the darkness near.

It even buzzes to catch my attention as I preach!  
Oh for the good old days. Right?

But, were the good old days really so good?

As I read about the evil of days gone by and read about the evil in our own day,  
I'm convinced that's the one thing that hasn't changed so much.

Evil has been and always will be (at least until the second coming) a force to be reckoned with. The darkness threatens to quench the light.

And that's where Christians speak a word of hope.  
We believe that darkness will not cover the earth forever.

Evil will not have the last word.

John, at the very beginning of his gospel tells us  
that the one who created it all entered creation.  
The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The light of the world has come into the world to do battle with the darkness.  
And in the end, the light will win. (John 1:4)

John 3:16 is indeed a very powerful verse. God loves the world.  
God loves the world so much that he sent His Son into the world.

But, the world that God loves is not some idealized world filled with goodness and light.

The world God loves is the same challenging world we live in today. Make no mistake. It is a world filled to overflowing with evil and darkness.

And it is this world that God comes to save.

## THE STUMBLING BLOCK

How does God do it?  
How does God save the world?

In a word the answer is the cross.

Like John 3:16 we've heard the message of the cross so much that we sort of tune it out.

When the preacher or the teacher talks about Jesus dying for our sins on the cross, that statement is often met with (believe it or not) a yawn.

It's partly our fault. We haven't explained why the cross is so important. We just sing about it, proclaim it and leave it at that.

This is where dialogue with someone outside the faith helped me understand this message a bit better.

Long ago I was talking with a man who was not a Christian. He wasn't hostile to the Christian faith.

He had been taught the faith as a child and had positive feelings about the church.

It was our theology that had him baffled.

He asked me, "What do you mean when you say that Jesus died on the cross for us?"

It doesn't make any sense to me. What does that mean."

His struggle with the cross is nothing new. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians referred to the message of the cross as a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.

(1 Corinthians 1:23)

But, I didn't want that message to be a stumbling block.

I wanted the message to be for him (as Paul put it) the “wisdom of God and the power of God”.

So, I gave him an answer. I knew all the standard answers by heart.

But, upon reflection, I was not so sure my answer was satisfactory. And his question challenged me to think about this more deeply.

What does it mean when we say that Jesus died on the cross for us? What does the death of Christ on the cross have to do with the love of God?

### THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS

You may have noticed that there’s an allusion to the cross in our lesson for today.

Unlike John 3:16, John 3:14 is not memorized by many people. You don’t see John 3:14 on signs at the football game. No one claims this verse as their favorite verse.

But, maybe we should claim this verse as a favorite because it explains how the love of God takes on the evil of the world.

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,…”

Many of you know the rest of that story. If you want to read it, it’s in the Old Testament book of Numbers. (Numbers 21:4-9)

But, let me give you a quick summary.

When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they struggled to believe in the Providential care of God.

Yes, times were hard and uncertain. But, again and again God provided all that they needed on a daily basis.

But, like many of us, daily bread wasn’t enough for them.

They wanted security and certainty.

But, you just don't get those things when you're on a journey in the wilderness.

In the wilderness, they kept running into trouble, and they blamed their problems on Moses...and on God.

Like Adam and Eve, they doubted the goodness of God.

So what happened next?

Have you ever heard of being "snake-bit".  
It's another way of talking about a run of bad luck.

Well God's people were snake bit...literally.  
They ran into a nest of poisonous vipers in the wilderness.

If it weren't for bad luck, they'd have no luck at all. Right?

But, they interpreted this encounter in a different way.

They saw it as the judgment of God.  
They realized that they had been "bad mouthing" God and his servant Moses.

And now the chickens (or in this case the snakes) had come home to roost.

So, the people cry out for salvation.  
And God brings them salvation in a unique way.

He has Moses fashion a serpent in bronze, place it on a pole and lift it up so the people can see it.

If they look up at that bronze serpent in faith, they will be healed.

What has God done? He has turned the object of torment (the snakes) into the object of salvation. (Indeed, to this day this is the symbol of healing in the medical profession.)

And it gives us a clue as to why the cross is an object of salvation.

Out of love God took the cross, the “emblem of suffering and shame”, as the hymn puts it, and turned it into the symbol of salvation.

The cross represents the triumph of God’s grace over evil.

When we are snake-bit in the wilderness,  
when we find faith at a low ebb,  
when we doubt that God loves us,

We look up...not to the bronze serpent  
...but to the cross.

Now don’t misunderstand.  
The cross is a symbol of evil.  
It is a symbol of the worst that the world can do.

We should never think of the cross as just a piece of jewelry or something to adorn our sanctuaries. It is indeed an “old rugged cross” as the hymn puts it.

But, on the other hand we cannot banish the cross  
to try and escape the hard truth that it brings us.

There’s more to this cross than just suffering and pain.

This cross is also about the triumph of God over evil. And this cross speaks a word of hope to us as we struggle in the wilderness even today.

The cross is a very complex symbol.

At the same time the cross connotes unspeakable cruelty...and God’s amazing grace.

It speaks of death and destruction...and eternal life.

It speaks of hate and rejection...and divine love.

“It’s complicated.”

But, so is life.

## HOW CAN GOD LOVE THIS WORLD?

Sometimes my faith wavers.  
Sometimes I ask,  
“God, how can you love this world?”

There are days when I don't love this world.  
There are days when darkness seems to cover the land.

There are days when I'm snake-bit and all I can think about is the pain.

There are days when powerful people tread on the backs of the poor, and  
no one seems to care.

There are days when the little ones are abused by those who are strong.

There are days when the world mocks those who are different.

Sometimes I get so angry at this world that I can't see straight.

My vision is clouded by the pain.

And yet I also recognize an even more painful truth.  
I'm part of the problem.  
I'm part of this sinful world.

By what I do and by what I fail to do,  
I forsake the God who delivered me from the wilderness.

## LOOK TO THE CROSS

And on those days, just as God's people looked to the bronze serpent,  
I need to look to the cross.

I need to remember the story and apply it to my story.  
God in Christ has done for me what I can't do on my own.

God's grace is indeed greater than all my sin.  
God loves this world.  
And God loves me.

God loves us too much to leave us in the wilderness.  
God loves us too much to leave us in our pain.

When we look to the cross, we do not run away from evil. We confront it.

We do not run away from those places of deep darkness.

We enter them in the name of Christ.

We take up the cross.  
We lose our life in service to the kingdom.

And oddly enough, when we do that,  
when we not only look to cross but also take up the cross, we find the salvation we had been searching for all along.

Posters, bumper stickers, tweets...and even memorizing Scripture  
are never enough when it comes to the kingdom of God.

We need something more.

## TURN ON THE LIGHT

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep.  
I close the door to our bedroom so as to not wake up my wife.

And you know what I do next?  
I usually kick a piece of furniture and condemn it to perdition.

But, then I turn on the light.  
It would make no sense to keep on stubbing my toe  
by stumbling around in the darkness.

And it makes no sense for Christians to live their lives stumbling around in  
the darkness either.

Living in the light of God means that we turn on the light.

Living in the light of God means embracing the gospel way of life.

Jesus said that he is the light of the world.  
And we turn on the light in our lives by looking at everything in the light of his life and teachings.

That's what being "born again" is all about.

And this new birth affects not only us;  
it also affects those around us.

What was it Jesus told his disciples?  
"You are the light of the world..." (Matthew 5:14)

That doesn't mean we are perfect.

But, it does mean that we have been given a message that offers light and hope to a dark world.  
We reflect the light of Christ.

And when we step out in the light of that message, we are transformed.

God enables us to become a new people,  
a new creation.

Through the power and grace of God we have  
(as the Bible puts it) been "created in Christ Jesus for good works". (Ephesians 2:10)

## LIVING ON A PIG FARM

I read an article in the New York Times this week about a man who is so upset with the way the world is going that he has decided to forsake the news completely.

He had enough money to quit his job and move to the country.

And for the past year and half he has lived alone on a pig farm in southeastern Ohio.

He goes for days without seeing anyone.  
A few days a week he goes into a small town to get coffee.

He goes earlier so there will be fewer people in the shop looking at their smart phones, and talking about the news. Just to be safe he puts on headphones.

He prefers white noise to music so that he can make sure he doesn't accidentally hear any news.

When a friend tried to break his news embargo with a few texts, he texted back to her,

"I'm officially cross with you. As you know very well, I don't wish to hear about current events.

I know you don't agree with my wishes but I do expect you to respect them."

You know sometimes I think we Christians try to live like this man who has a total embargo on the news.

We try to shut out the world.

We try to ignore the bad news, the pain and suffering.

In fact there was a time when the church seemed to believe that we can be most holy by living totally apart from this harsh world.

We called those places monasteries.

But, this is not the Christian way.

We are not called to live out our lives on a pig farm in southeastern Ohio.

We are not called to be monks who avoid the world.

The Christian way is to enter the world, a world that is dark and foreboding.

But, as the Psalmist put it, "we fear no evil."

(Psalm 23)

We are not alone.

God in Christ has gone before us.

Just as God in Christ came into the world so we are called to enter this world.

We are called to reflect that glory in word and in deed.

## CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE

Let me give you one more visual example of what that might look like.

Gloria Alvarado's son, Jaime travels the world as a flight attendant. And he told me of something that happened when he was in Greece on Christmas Eve.

Some of you may have seen that movie, "Mama Mia!"

In that movie there's a small church that sits high atop a rocky mount that overlooks a little village.

Well, that's a real village and a real church.  
And this was where Jaime was located that Christmas Eve.

The church is very small and holds just a few people.

But, on Christmas Eve the whole village comes out bearing candles.

They fill the church, the steps that lead to the church, and the whole town square.

Just like we used to do, at one point in the service the light from the Christ candle is passed to the congregation.

But, this does not end at the church door. The light is passed on to those who line the steps that lead the church. And eventually the light reaches the whole town below.

Jaime said that it was one of the most impressive things he had ever witnessed.

Think about that.

Try to imagine what that might look like.  
Let that be your visual image of this passage.

God loves the world.

His light streams from above, and the darkness cannot contain it.

Amen.