**March 15, 2015 – 4th Sunday of Lent**

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John 3:16 - *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.*

Who among us hasn’t seen or heard, or heard of, this Bible verse – probably the most famous verse in the entire New Testament. Who hasn’t seen it held up on signs at football games and protest marches, and on billboards and bumper stickers?

But what about John 3:17? That poor redheaded stepchild of a Bible verse, paling in comparison to its more famous cousin.

*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.*

Or, for that matter, what about the verses that come before, that seem so removed from this most beloved verse.

*Jesus said to Nicodemus, "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.*

As much as we love this verse, to take it out of context is to remove a lot of its impact and greater meaning. But we love doing that, don’t we? It just makes it so much easier to listen to because it doesn’t demand anything of us.

But this passage is VERY demanding, and if all we take away from it is this one verse, out of place, we do John, and Jesus, I think, a great disservice. So let’s start with the context.

This passage is at the end of a conversation that Jesus has with a Pharisee and Jewish leader named Nicodemus. The text doesn’t indicate that the Pharisees were out to get Jesus yet at this point, but that idea must have been in the wind somewhere because Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus under the cover of darkness. Still, he seems to speak for all the Pharisees when he says, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him.” So far, so good.

But then Jesus takes the conversation off the rails. Instead of answering him in a conventional way like, “Well, I’m glad you see that,” or “You’re right,” he starts in with a mystery, and says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

And when questioned, not unreasonably, by Nicodemus about how this could work, Jesus doubles down with, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.  That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.  Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.'  The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Well poor Nick’s head must have been spinning by that point and he might have been a tad frustrated when he answered, “How can this be?” Or in our vernacular, “What in the actual HECK are you talking about?” To which Jesus replies, “You call yourself a teacher of Israel and you don’t even get this?”

Well oftentimes, when Jesus puts down the Pharisees or the Scribes, we, the Gospel readers, feel pretty smug because we know what’s going on and they don’t. But I don’t think that’s the case here, because this is some pretty mysterious stuff. This is why we can’t reduce what comes next to a slogan or a bumper sticker. To do so cuts off any potential meaning we might glean from wrestling with it rather than merely quoting it.

Raymond E. Brown, who is a noted New Testament scholar, said it best in his book, *The Johannine World for Preachers*, "Do not domesticate the Johannine Jesus. It is his style to say things that border on the offensive. Be puzzled and even offended; but do not silence this Jesus by deciding what he should not have said and what your hearers should not hear."

So let’s wrestle with this passage.

This passage starts with Jesus using an illustration from the book of Numbers. The Israelites have been wandering in the desert for some time, and are getting pretty crabby about it. “There’s no bread,” they complain. “There is no water! And we hate this food!” – referring to the manna that God had sent to sustain them.

Long story short, God sends poisonous snakes and the people start dying. They repent and God tells Moses to make a bronze snake and raise it up on a pole, and if anyone is bitten they can look at the bronze snake and be healed.

Jesus then tells Nicodemus who, as a Pharisee, knows his Hebrew Scriptures very well, that the Son of Man must be lifted up like that bronze snake was, so that everyone who looks up to him will not merely be healed physically, but will have eternal life. This is the first of a series of linked statements.

* God loved the world so much that he gave his only son so that everyone would have eternal life if they believed in him.
* God sent his son into the world not to condemn it, but in order to save it.
* 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.

These are statements about belief and salvation – *pisteuo* and *sodzo*. But *pisteuo* is also translated as trust, and *sodzo* is also translated as healing, so these are also statements about trust and healing. Or to mix it up, belief and healing, and trust and salvation. These are way bigger concepts than can fit on a bumper sticker. These are the foundations of our relationship with God through Jesus. We believe and trust in God and God saves and heals us.

Notice, though, that God makes the first move, and leaves it up to us to respond. We aren’t compelled or forced. God doesn’t come in vengeance to destroy the sinful world, but rather in love to save it. For God SO loved the world.

But then, just as we think Jesus ISN’T here to judge us, this passage ends in a whole bunch of what sound like judgment statements:

* …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.

Once again, Jesus is talking about choice here. We can choose to believe or not. We can choose to live in the light or in the darkness. We can choose to do evil, but if we do, we will hate the light more and more.

All this talk about living in darkness and hating the light forms a bracket around the story of Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus. If you recall, Nicodemus came to visit Jesus under the cover of darkness, and he left without indicating any kind of belief or trust in God’s son. This underscores the idea that even the most devoutly religious person will be judged not on how religious he is, but on his belief and on the choices he makes in whether to live his life in the light or in the dark.

We have those same choices to make, day in and day out. God has offered us the choice of life or death, of light or darkness. What we do with that gift is up to us, and let’s be clear – how we live matters. Running a stop sign when no one’s there to see may not seem like a major crime, but it pushes us a little further into the darkness. We may have plenty of good reasons for ignoring someone on the street who asks for our help – like they should get a job, or they’re only going to use the money to buy drugs, or they have a cell phone so how poor can they really be? – but each time we turn away from someone in need when we could help, we move a little further into the darkness. Each time we gossip or complain about someone, or mock and belittle someone, we edge a little further into the darkness.

I’m convinced that many of the people we consider to be truly bad – like the Bernie Madoff types, or the CEOs of the big corporations who are getting richer while their employees are on food stamps, or any of the televangelists who have been caught embezzling or with prostitutes – I’m convinced that many of them didn’t start out evil, but little by little, by the choices they made and the actions they took, they ended up in the darkness.

Not that any of us are likely to end up as swindlers and charlatans on such a grand scale. But where are our choices – big and small - leading us – towards God’s light or into the dark?

God has already sent his only son to save the world. This was done over 2,000 years ago. I think this passage makes it clear that our salvation is not dependent upon how good, or how religious we are. It’s dependent upon our belief and our trust in God’s saving grace. How we act, whether we choose to live in light or darkness, is our response to the gift that has been freely given to us.

How would our lives change if we looked on each action we take, no matter how small, as a response to God and an expression of our gratitude and trust? And, at the same time, what would happen if we rooted out of our lives all of those actions that didn’t fit with that trust. Oh, we’re not going to be perfect at it, but if, every day, we move a little closer to the light, how much better would our world be? It’s worth thinking about.

Amen.