

Hopkins South Monterey

United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

Mar 14, 2021

Pastor Kelsey

John 3:14-21

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."

Prayer & Sermon

Loving God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

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.

This is likely the most well-known Bible verse, at least in America, if not the world. It is one that has been chosen as the definitive statement of what being Christian means.

It is a verse that is slapped on the bottom of Forever 21 bags, on endless billboards, tattooed on many people, and, outside of permanent ink, it is surely the most memorized verse in people's minds. It is probably vaguely known even by those who have never been to church. Unfortunately, particularly with those who are not believers, this verse has been used more as a battering ram to convince a faith confession at the fear of going to hell instead of a loving invitation to experience God's love. The verse being so well known and used so widely, it means that a specific meaning of the verse has been drilled into our minds. Hearing the verse on its own so often and the classic use of the verse comes at the price of not looking at the story that surrounds the verse to help interpret it. This even happens in the selection of the lectionary text, the verses that are given to us as an option each Sunday. These verses from John 3 are the last half of the story of Nicodemus and Jesus. Knowing what happened in the first half is pretty important to know what Jesus is speaking to through his response in the second half we already read.

The highlights of Nicodemus's story are that he was a Pharisee, so a Jewish leader, and he came to Jesus in the cover of night to reveal that he believed Jesus to come from God. Jesus agrees with his assessment in his cryptic way, saying that he must be "born anew" to see God's kingdom. This confused Nicodemus a bit, who then questions, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus responds with the probably familiar, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." and went on to break it down cryptically some more. Nicodemus was still confused, and Jesus basically rolled his eyes at him "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" and shames Nicodemus a bit more for not getting it. Jesus continued, basically saying, "I know what I'm talking about because I came from heaven, and I came so that the world might be saved from condemnation, though there are many who prefer to remain hidden because 'their deeds were evil.'"

That leads us to verse 14, which comes from the middle of Jesus's speech clarifying things for Nicodemus a bit. What Jesus finally resorts to is to compare himself and his purpose to a simple and familiar Old Testament story we know from Numbers 21 telling of an episode of the Israelites journey to the Promise Land with Moses when a bunch of poisonous snakes show up and they are saved by God's instruction to look at the bronze snake in Moses's hand. Side note, that is the story that we get the current symbol for medical work of the staff surrounded by the two snakes. Anyway, this comparison made Nicodemus remember God's continued saving work in the world. In that story in Numbers, God protected the people from a present danger. On the most basic, Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus to understand that God is continuing the protection of the people, now through the raising of Jesus, the Son. As the Israelites were saved from death by looking at the bronze snake, all people can be saved by looking to Jesus.

It is from that message that we get 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.” Not from a place of condemnation or refusal but as part of helping Nicodemus understand what is different now that Jesus is incarnated and invite him into something new with God.

Dwelling on verse 16 a bit more, one of the aspects of the verse that is surely part of why it became so famous, is because it seems to give a simple formula to get “eternal life” which is often thought to mean a spot in heaven. This is not exactly wrong, but in my usual digging about the passage for this week, it was made clear to me from the Biblical Scholars that the way that eternal life and heaven have been equated as the same through this passage, but that is not the most faithful interpretation from the Greek. Often this verse is used to tell people that they must confess belief to Jesus or else they will have the opposite of eternal life and heaven, death and afterlife in hell. Alas, the English translation has shortchanged us in this case and it hasn’t been easy to understand the truer meaning from the Greek it was written in. I could tell you the greek words and explain their translations in depth, but ultimately I think that will leave you thinking more, “It’s all greek to me!” instead of, “interesting, that helps me understand!” So, I will just explain the summary and you can ask me for the greek details later if you want to know that badly. The important part about breaking down the Greek is that it reveals that the “eternal life” that Jesus was referring to was less about our afterlife to come after death, and less about eternal life as immortality, but instead in the Greek, Jesus is saying that believing in Jesus brings us into an abundant, high quality way to live life in the here and now. In this understanding, verse 3:16 could be saying something like, God so loved the world so that those who believe in him will be drawn deeper into a connection with themselves, and with God and neighbor. This understanding of this iconic verse makes it more about a loving invitation into a better way to live right now, and not just a ticket into heaven once this useless life on earth is over. This makes this iconic verse more about a call to discipleship or deepening faith instead of a shallow threat to believe.

This invitation into a life lived abundantly is followed by hopeful words assuring that the point of Jesus coming to be with us on Earth is not to bring a fire and brimstone message of condemnation for the world, but a message and invitation of hope and love to save all peoples from their present lives into a life lived in the light of God. As this whole conversation is framed around someone who is struggling to understand what has changed now that God sent Jesus, this speech from Jesus is an invitation to those who do not understand what living with the light of God can mean, to become aware of that option. Jesus also recognizes that as much as there are those who are just ignorant to the invitation, there are also those, perhaps like Nicodemus who literally came to Jesus in the night, that would rather stick with darkness because in the cover of darkness they can enjoy their evil deeds without reproach or guilt. These last 3 verses tell us that believing in Jesus as the Son of God is not enough to truly live in the light of abundant life, but that we must also live into with our actions. We can believe in Jesus all we want, but if we choose to stay in the darkness and continue our activities there, then we won’t be able to be a part of that abundant life. This last part is pretty crucial and it is rarely talked about in tandem with John 3:16 that only speaks about believing.

To live life with Christ and enjoy that eternal life with God, we must both believe and act on it.

I hope that what I have said so far has not come off like I am dismissing the power and meaning of John 3:16. I do think it could be shared out of context less, but ultimately, I agree with the majority thought that it is a very foundational verse to our faith. Though, it may be for a bit of a different reason. As I said before, I seem to usually hear this verse pulled out as a way to tell non-believers that they should believe so they can achieve eternal life. This use of the verse makes the message of the passage more about what we can get out of faith with God and what deal we can cut with Jesus. I understand this verse as one of the most foundational verses because it is clear in speaking to how God's love for the world is the main motivation for God's interactions with us. God sent the Son, Jesus, because how much God loves us. God sent Jesus to share how we can all better connect with that love, not to bring exclusivity and condemnation for the many. What was more important than the consequences for Jesus's life was to share that abundant love of God in the various ways that Jesus lived, taught, healed, and upturned norms. This perhaps doesn't sound like such a huge difference, but shifting the focus to God's love from the earning of eternal life helps us to center our belief on our God who acts from love first, instead of other motivations. This is an important difference. What makes God different and apart from our human ways is that God is motivated and acts honestly from the foundations of love and grace instead of other motivations like hate or punishment or revenge. Our God of love instead of revenge means we can fully trust God with our vulnerability. We can trust that we can come to God with our mistakes and our messy bits and God will bring us healing and transformation every time. Our God being a God of love instead of competition means we can trust that God's love has always been there and will always be there. God's love is our landing pad when we feel like everything is topsy turvy. God's love is our constant hope for transformation and restoration. God's love is our assurance we can accept the invitation to step into the light, and live out our faith. God's love is our fuel so that we can then live our lives loving God in return, and loving ourselves and our neighbors as much as we can.

No matter what we do, where we go, or what we tell ourselves—God is love, and God is loving us. Again and again, we can always trust that we are claimed, held, forgiven, and cared for. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.

*God of the here and now— We have heard the words,
“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son,”*

*Time and time again. We have read them on billboards, heard them in worship,
and seen them on signs.*

*And yet we know, there is a difference between hearing those words in passing
And truly, deeply listening.*

We long to listen, God. We long to hear your truth. We long to know your love.

Open our hearts and minds.

We are listening.

In the name of the Lover, the Beloved, and Love itself—thanks be to God. Amen!