

Sermon for March 14 (Synod Sermon)

Greetings beloved friends! I am Pastor Patti Axel, Assistant to Bishop Strickland and Director of Evangelical Mission in partnership with Ms. Melissa Fuller-Sims. Today I bring to you the Good News from the Gospel of John.

Gospel: John 3:14-21

Glory to You, O Lord

[Jesus said:] 14“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that 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. 18Those 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. 19And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21But 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.”

The Good News of Jesus Christ

Praise to You, O Christ

Gracious and ever-present Lord Jesus, we give you thanks for your obedience to God in every aspect of your life on earth. We give you thanks for the light that you shined in our darkness so that we might have life. Draw us to the light so that you might show us a better way and we may lead others to You. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

A number of years ago, when my son was in his early 20's, he came home after an eventful evening and proclaimed to me, “Mom, nothing good ever happens after midnight. I should have come home earlier.” With that he went to bed.

Now it has been a long time since I have been out after midnight unless you count the times I rushed to the ER in the middle of the night with a child or met a family in my congregation who was in crisis or countless night shifts working in the NICU. My nights of going out to party after 10 and coming

home at dawn were long behind me so I tended to agree with Ryan and decided I would have to wait to hear the rest of the story after he got some sleep, IF he decided to tell me.

Our Gospel reading for today starts in the middle of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Jewish elders who ultimately condemn Jesus to death. I think Nicodemus was curious about this Galilean carpenter who had garnered so much attention in Jerusalem of lately. The rest of Nicodemus' friends in the Sanhedrin had likely already passed judgment but Nicodemus wanted more information. So he came to Jesus for a conversation after dark for fear that someone would see him and he would be accused of being a secret follower.

We come into the conversation as Jesus is referring back to Numbers 21 when the Israelites in the wilderness angered God by complaining against God and Moses. God sent poisonous serpents among the people and many were bitten and died. The people came to Moses after realizing that their complaining had compelled God to do this and asked for deliverance. God told Moses to make a poisonous serpent and set in on a pole and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live. Just as the serpent on a pole gave life, even more so when Jesus is lifted up on a cross, and people see his body, beaten and bloodied, they will see what he has done for them and believe.

Being a good Jew, Nicodemus would have been familiar with this story and maybe puzzled by what Jesus was saying but Jesus continued with even better news, "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.

17Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Vs. 16 is not the complete message, indeed God did not send Jesus to condemn the world but out of great love so that we would be saved. The lifting up of Jesus onto the cross was not the end of the story. Jesus was raised from the dead and then raised up into heaven to sit at God's right hand.

God sent Jesus to shine a light into the world for all to see how much God loves us. God took on our skin, our life, our trials and pain and burdens, to show us how much God loved us and had not given up on us, regardless of our adverse behavior much of the time. The cross is just part of the story. This instrument of death and terror that the Romans so readily used to "keep the peace" may get us to look up and realize the weight of our sin on Him.

Jesus was obedient unto death so that we would have life. As Jesus died with our sin, he was raised and we are raised with him. The empty tomb gets our attention and lifts up our eyes to look around - where is Jesus? Our baptismal beginnings in the life of faith remind us of this dying and new life. We are washed clean in the death and resurrection of Jesus and given new life. But that is still not the end - Jesus is raised up into heaven. Our gaze is lifted even higher as we watch him ascend to sit beside his Father and rule in mercy and love. Jesus doesn't leave us to figure this out on our own but sends the Spirit to call, gather, enlighten and make us holy; the Spirit is our companion on earth to continue what Jesus began and to shine the light of God's great love on our path, making possible the way.

This eternal life Jesus speaks of is not merely a hope for the future but a present reality in that our eternal life and the promise of an eternal, never-ending relationship with God is ours NOW! Jesus does not leave us alone with a hall pass to get into heaven when the time is right. Jesus makes sure we have a partner to guide and teach and correct and put us back on the path today and tomorrow and all the rest of our days.

John 3:16 is a well known and well loved, often repeated scripture passage but it is not complete without the next verse. I always make sure that I don't stop this message before we realize that Christ came to bring life, not to condemn. We do our own condemning by refusing to listen and engage Christ in our lives. We have a choice. If we do not allow Christ to shine His holy light into our lives so that we might leave the evil behind and shake off the dust of division and separation, we choose the darkness to our own detriment. Christ offers light and life and offers to walk along side us so that we may learn from Him but he will never force us to follow.

Choose life beloved! Amen