

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22  
John 3:14-21

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
March 11, 2018

### **For God So Loved...**

#### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Our Psalm for this Fourth Sunday in Lent is a thanksgiving psalm. People who had found themselves facing various dangers were given the opportunity to offer thanks to God for his deliverance and to fulfill the vows they had made in the midst of their life-threatening experiences. Listen to these words from Psalm 107:1-3 and 17-22...

#### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

Our Gospel Lesson today contains familiar verses to all who have grown up in the church, attended Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. The governing image is light—appropriate to God's revelation in Christ Jesus. And at the heart of that revelation is God's love for the world. Listen to these words from John 3:14-21...

#### *Sermon*

If we haven't already, sometime during this Lenten season—as we move ever closer to Holy Week, to Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter—we would do well to meditate upon the motive that lies behind the cross of Jesus. What motive could possibly be so strong and compelling as to lead the eternal God of all time and creation to become one with human suffering and accept and endure the death of a common criminal, even death upon a cross.

John the Evangelist answers the question with what contains one of the most familiar verses in the whole Bible, as found in the King James Version:

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. (3:16)

For several years John 3:16 showed up on the faces of football players like Tim Tebow or on a sign in the end zone. It could be spotted on a player's eye black—that sticker or grease they wear under their eyes to reduce glare.

John 3:16 focuses our attention squarely on God and the principle quality of God's nature. Why the incarnation? Why the testing in the wilderness? Why the cross of Calvary? It was all for love. God's love for the world. God's love for you and me.

To be sure, there are preachers who relish the opportunity to chastise their congregations with seething sermons on sin and its consequences. And what better time for such than Lent? The truth is that many folks get a kick out of hearing these kinds of sermons, so long as they are directed against the sins of other people, with they themselves being spared.

An eighteenth century Moravian Church bishop, August Spangenberg, once contrasted the spirit of a "happy Christian" with that of some of the morose preachers of his day and their heavy emphasis upon human depravity. Spangenberg's distinction between the two was that while some preaching places our *sins* in the foreground and commands us to look from them to the cross, the gospel places the *cross* in the foreground and calls us to look from it to our sins. The distinction is subtle but important. One looks first to the human condition, while the other looks first to the divine motive. In no way is sin to be taken lightly or ignored, as if it doesn't really matter. But the gospels reveal the power of God's love to be greater than any sin. And the cross represents the victory of one and the defeat of the other.

In the middle ages, this fourth Sunday in Lent was called *Laetare*. The mass began, "Latere Jerusalem" or "Rejoice, O Jerusalem!" Sometimes this Sunday is called "Refreshment

Sunday,” noted for a lessening of the severity of Lenten disciplines. Flowers not allowed to adorn the altar during the rest of Lent, were permitted on this Sunday. Rose-colored vestments might be used instead of the more somber purple. The Gospel reading was John 6:1-15 with Jesus the living bread of heaven to provide nourishment for the journey of Lent. And the word of John 3 is a similar occasion for us to pause along the doleful road of Lent, long enough to see the cross in its proper perspective: “For God so loved...For God sent his Son—not to condemn, but to save...”

And thus it is when we turn our heads toward Jerusalem and the Via Dola Rosa—The Way of Sorrows—we can see what lay behind that road: the amazing force of God’s perfect love, sent to save and woo us into his kingdom. For God so loved...

Mother Teresa, known in the Catholic Church as Saint Teresa of Calcutta, is recognized throughout the world for her acts of compassion to thousands whom nobody else was prepared to care for. Born in 1910 in Macedonia to working class Albanian parents, she felt called to be a missionary by the age of 12. At 18 she joined a community of Irish nuns dedicated to education, with schools in India. Sister Teresa spent 17 years teaching and serving as principal of St. Mary’s high school in Calcutta.

Well, Teresa grew restless looking through the windows at the poverty of the slums. So at age 36, on her way to a retreat center to recover from a lung ailment, she received a new calling: “I heard the call to give up all and follow [Jesus] into the slums—to serve Him in the poorest of the poor....I knew it was His will and that I had to follow Him.” Later, this calling was confirmed during a mystical experience in which she heard the voice of Jesus pleading, “Come, come, carry me into the holes of the poor. Come be My light.” That last sentence is the subtitle of the book of her private writings, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*.

After years of trying to overcome the doubts of her superiors, she founded the Missionaries of Charity in 1950. What began as a community of 12 members, caring for the sick and dying in the slums of Calcutta, has grown to thousands of nuns running orphanages, AIDS hospices, and other charity centers around the world.

In 1979, Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize, accepting it on behalf of the “unwanted, unloved and uncared for.” The following year she was invited to speak at the Synod of Bishops in Rome. In the middle of her brief but powerful message she delivered this interpretation of John 3:16:

*Today God loves the world so much that he gives you, He gives me to love the world, to be His love. His compassion. It is such a beautiful thought for us—and conviction—that you and I can be that love and compassion.*

Two weeks ago some 12 people from Midway attended the Elisabeth Von Trapp Concert at First Presbyterian Church here in Anderson. We enjoyed hearing her sing and play the guitar. One of the songs she sang was the opening to the reprisal of “Sixteen Going on Seventeen,” sung by Maria to 16-year-old Liesel. The words are:

A bell is no bell til you ring it  
 A song is no song til you sing it  
 And love in your heart wasn't put there to stay  
 Love isn't love til you give it away

And that's what Mother Teresa did—she gave away the love of God that was in her heart.

As noted in the introduction, the governing image in our Gospel Lesson is light, a favorite motif of John's Gospel. Jesus Christ is the light of the world. Whoever follows him will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. (Jn. 8:12) The Nicene Creed declares that Jesus is “God from God, light from light, true God from true God.” No one has ever seen God but the only Son has made God known (1:18), and to know God is life eternal (17:3). This

symbol of light was especially moving in a time before electricity made artificial light available most everywhere.

An early name for the baptized is “the enlightened.” And the image was continued by giving the newly baptized a candle. In the Lutheran rite are the accompanying words,

Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Mt. 5:16)

But light is also a most appropriate metaphor for expressing both the judgment and the grace implicit in Christ’s coming. Christ did not come to judge but his coming is a judgment in the same way that turning on a light can be the exposure and conviction of those who prefer darkness because their deeds are evil (v. 20). At the same time, the light is for others a gift and the occasion for joy (v. 21). The scriptures reveal that an act of God’s love has both positive and negative effects. A stepping-stone may be for some a stumbling block; a wonderful feast may be the occasion for sickness that results from gluttony. A saving presence can also be a disturbing presence. All who preach and live the gospel know this painful truth. To speak the Good News, to voice the love of Christ, to reflect his truth, in some settings is not to be unanimously received with applause and blessing. Other forces are aroused by the word of God’s love and truth.

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world,  
and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds  
were evil. (v. 19)

And so we get the betrayal, the mocking, the spitting, the crown of thorns, the scourging, and the Cross.

Yet through it all God’s grace and truth and love is reaching out to save. Christ is lifted up on the Cross—that we might be saved. “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto myself.” (Jn. 12:32) Laetare Jerusalem. Rejoice, O Jerusalem!

Finally this, there's a moment near the end of James Bridie's play, *Jonah and the Whale*, when Jonah is standing on a hilltop overlooking Ninevah. Reluctantly, Jonah has gone forth to Ninevah, preached the doom and condemnation that the Ninevites deserve, and now he eagerly awaits their destruction. But God spares Ninevah, and Jonah is hot with anger, even accusing God of being a divine double-crosser. In the final scene of the play, Jonah stands alone in the spotlight and with sad resignation mutters to himself, "There must be a God, I would never have thought of this myself!"

None of us would have. Nor would we have ever thought of the shameful cross, the depths of the love of Christ, the amazing grace and the forgiveness for all our sins. But God did. And because God thought and acted, the power of his love displayed in the cross keeps drawing us into his kingdom, saving us from sin, restoring us to the joy of God's salvation. "For God so loved..." As the pilgrims of Psalm 107, let us give thanks. For his steadfast love that endures forever. Laetare...Rejoice, O Jerusalem.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.