

For God so loved the world. . . .

Sunday March 10, the 4th Sunday in Lent, has the Gospel text John 3:14-21. This text contains a verse that is considered one of the most well-known and quoted verses in the Bible. ***John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*** Martin Luther said the verse is "the gospel in miniature", author Max Lucado, describes the verse as "a twenty-[five] word parade of hope" and the conciseness of the verse makes it easy to remember. John 3:16 is among ten most-searched verses in Google and other search engines. You have seen John 3:16 on billboards or banners during national televised events. John 3:16 has been printed on shopping bags and on the bottom of paper cups.

Most of us know this verse by heart. But, how many of us remember the verses before or after it? The Gospel text begins at v.14 with a play on the word "lift up." It describes God's command to Moses to lift up the serpent in the wilderness and the lifting up that is in store for Jesus. The passage makes little sense without the background story from Numbers 21:4-9, our First Lesson for this Sunday. In that narrative, the people became "impatient" on their way. Still in the wilderness after their departure from Egypt and despairing of being able to survive in a land with no food and water, they complained against God and Moses. Consequently, terrible serpents appeared, bit the people, and killed them. When they repented, the Lord told Moses to make a serpent and set it on a pole so that anyone who had been bitten might look at it and live. The serpent was a mark of God's anger and God's mercy. God's people might be saved by the God of life, if only they would look upon the image of that which would have brought about their death. To see the Son of Man lifted up calls for "belief" for the sake of eternal life, not simply a restoration of earthly life. God once saved the people by calling upon them to gaze on the serpent. Now, God would save the people by having them gaze in belief upon the Son, lifted up.

Next comes John 3:16, in which the "so" is often misunderstood. The Greek *houtos* means "so" in the sense of "just so," or "in this way," or the more archaic, "thusly." We could translate the verse as "This is the way God loved the world, with the result that he gave his only Son, in order that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 is not about how much God loved the world. It is about in what way God loved the world. The single most important thing about this verse is that God loved the world. God deeply loved the world that God created, and God longs for this creation to live. It is not only God's own people whom God will save, as in the Numbers story. It is the cosmos that God has loved, precisely by having given the only son. The purpose of God's having sent the Son was to save the world, just as the purpose of commanding Moses to erect a serpent on a pole was to save the people from death. The son came to save, to grant eternal life because God loved the world. That was Jesus' announcement. I'm here because the God who loved you of old, still does. He sent me to tell you, to show you, to gather you up into life with him forever.

The verses after John 3:16 tell us that Jesus' coming is like the bringing of a light into a dark space. The contrast of light and dark is intense. The coming of the Son into the world leads to numerous pairs of contrasting realities: condemn and save; believe and not believe; stay in the darkness and come into the light; do evil and doing what is true. These opposites express the sharp distinction that is created when our dark cosmos is entered by the light of God. Like the people in the story in Numbers, we have already been bitten or are in imminent danger of being bitten. Death is inevitable. When the bronze serpent is brought into the world, we look and live, or we do not. As Jesus comes into the world, we trust that which bears God's gracious love, or we do not. We receive eternal life or we continue to live apart from God, condemned. These verses reveal the contrasting ways to depict God's own goal and longing. God's way of loving the world was to send the Son to save it. Jesus is God's expression of love and longing. The light comes to find us, to illuminate our path for our sake, because God wants us. God reaches out through the Son with the sheer purpose of sharing everlasting life with us.

Yes, John tells us there are real consequences in our daily life and our everlasting relationship with God. But he tells us in order to help us see the contrasts, look clearly at our lives, appreciate the gracious gift of God as a gift of love, and live in fearless confidence of that love. Have we ever been so truly and consistently desired by another as we are by God? No indeed. God loved the world in this way that he gave the Son so that we might live forever with God.

WORSHIP SERVICE SUNDAY 10 AM
SERVICE OF HEALING WITH HOLY COMMUNION
COME AND KNOW THAT GOD SO LOVES YOU