

Second Sunday of Lent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
5 March 2023

John 3:1-17

We have arrived at the single most well-known verse of Scripture. But it is important that we understand this verse in its full context, which is the first three chapters of John, starting at 1:18. John is at heart a disciple of Plato. His cosmology is a two-world cosmology. There is the world below, which is filled with darkness, hatred, avarice, violence, envy, and treason. This is the human world and it is but shadows of the real world of heaven, where God lives. Heaven is full of freedom, joy, love, compassion, and prosperity. Heaven is a world as God intended it to be, without disobedience. A world filled with God's shalom and God's love. To see that God sent his beloved to become one of us is to say that God sent his Son into enemy territory. But before we get into the text, let us remind each other why we have come to this place today.

Today we gather around this altar to hear God's word and to share in the Body and Blood of our Savior. We come as we are, without pretense and without masks. We come as we are with our anxiety, fears, expectations, regrets, unresolved grievances, dreams, pains, illnesses, joys, and hopes. Regardless of where each of us finds ourselves this day, we come to this table as we are in search of love and acceptance, yearning for forgiveness and encouragement, thirsting for a welcoming embrace, ready for reconciliation, tired of our misery, and hungry for infinity. We come to this table because only at the table of God's Word and God's sacraments can we find relief, strength and acceptance. Only at God's table can we find restoration. Only God can save us.

We come to this Holy Place because we need to hear the ancient truth that "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 ancient truth speaks of several realities. It talks about a gift, a particular way of delivering that gift, and about the people to whom this gift is given. The verse tells us that the giver is God himself. God, in his infinite grace, chose to give a gift. We are also told that he gave this gift because he loves the world. This is remarkable! We may want to ask the question here, "Why does God love the world?" Is it that the world is so obedient to God that their obedience inspires God's Love? Is it that humanity has developed such capacity for love of God and love of others that God chooses to love them back because of their devotion? Is humanity the obedient and loyal child whose only concern is God's business, and whose only motivation in life is to honor God? Just the opposite! The history of the world is filled with disobedience, greed, bloodshed, arrogance, idol worship, and betrayal. God chose to give his gift to cheating, back-sliding, betraying, lying, violent, murderous humanity!

We are told in the passage that God loves the world. This love is at the core of who God is. Above all, God is love! So, out of love, God gives a gift. And what a gift! The

passage tells us that he gave the world his only begotten son. Now, imagine this for a moment. God gives his only-begotten Son—his beloved Son, in whom he was well pleased. Now, since we know that the Son shares in the same substance as the Father and the Holy Spirit, we can say that God gives himself for the sake of humanity. What else can God give to prove his love for the world? He gave himself, completely, totally, unreservedly, without limitations or conditions.

What great love is this! Now it is possible that someone would give his life for another, especially a friend. But to give your son's life for an enemy, for a plotting, conniving and murderous adversary, this is incredible. Would you ever give up your son to save an enemy? Spurgeon once said, "He did not give his Son, as you might do, to some profession in the pursuit of which you might still enjoy his company; but he gave his Son to exile among men... He sent him down to hunger, and thirst, amid poverty so dire that he had not where to lay his head. He sent him down to the scourging and the crowning with thorns, to the giving of his back to the smiters and his cheeks to those that plucked off the hair. At length he gave him up to death—a felon's death, the death of the crucified. Behold that cross and see the anguish of him that dies upon it, and mark how the Father has so given him, that he hides his face from him, and seems as if he would not own him! "Lama sabachthani" tells us how fully God gave his Son to ransom the souls of the sinful. He gave him to be made a curse for us; gave him that he might die 'the just for the unjust...'” (Spurgeon, Complete Sermons, John 3:16).

Now, many believe that God gave his Son to the world at the time of Jesus, but in fact, God gave his only Son to the world at the beginning of Creation. Christ has been with us from the beginning of everything, from the very foundation of the world. And then, at the appointed time the Son became human and dwelt among us. He who was divine became human for our sake. He who was promised to Adam right after the Fall finally arrived to earth when the time was right. God gives us the gift of his son, not just his death, but also his entire life, before, during, and after his passion on the cross for us.

God is the giver of this gift, which he gives out of profound love. Christ is the gift given, promised from the beginning of creation, incarnated into human form at the fullness of time and for the sake of creation. Now let us talk about those for whom the gift is given. Certainly God is talking about the those who follow the Covenant, those who are religious, those who are morally pure, those who deserve this gift, right? Wrong! God's gift is for those who believe in Christ. Not just for those who deserve it, but for those who accept the gift in faith. The gift is for you and for me. Do you feel too distant from God's love? Have courage, if you believe, God's gift of his Son is for you! Do you feel unforgivable? Have courage, if you believe, God will forgive you through the blood of his Son on the cross! What a wonderful gift! Salvation, restoration, forgiveness, inclusion into his family, legal adoption, elimination of the debt, freedom from judgement, hope, and joy.

It saddens me, brothers and sisters, that some refuse this gift. When presented with

life they say, “I have no need of God.” How can anyone not have need for God? How can anyone willingly choose darkness? My friends the passage does not say how much faith we must have in order to be saved. It simply says, we must believe in Him, who is the source of life. Some of us make faith into a work by obsessing that they don’t have enough faith. Trust me, God can look into my weak, insignificant faith and see there the roots of a great tree. We must trust that he will accept our faith, weak as it might be, and use it for our salvation. New birth is something God gives us and not something we either deserve nor control. New birth comes as an outpouring of God and is not something I create, earn, or inherit as a birth right. It is a free gift to which we say “Yes” or “No”.

This is our choice. God will never force us to accept his gift. I pray today that you will reach out and accept this gift, “For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son into the world that you, and you, and you and I may not perish, but have eternal life.” Amen!