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“God’s Offensive Love”¹

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

4th Sunday in Lent (Year B)

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John 3:14-21

It’s probably the most memorized Bible verse in the Christian community. John 3:16. At ballgames and big events, on billboards and bumper-stickers, the full verse doesn’t even have to be written out. Just put John 3:16 in bold paint on a sign and a large percentage of people who see it can quote the verse they memorized in Sunday school or confirmation class or heard somewhere along the way: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Martin Luther called it the “gospel in a nutshell” and many understand it as such. *Presbyterian Outlook* editor Jill Duffield calls it a “lovely encapsulation of the character of God and the world of Jesus Christ.”²

¹ This is the title of a commentary on this passage by David Lose at <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/lent-4-b/> (accessed 3-9-18). I couldn’t get the title out of my head, so I used the title, and some of his commentary, to guide my thinking and my preaching today. I remain grateful for Lose’s wisdom and insight into scripture and our daily lives as disciples of Jesus.

² From Jill Duffield’s *Presbyterian Outlook* email commentary on Lent 4, Year B, March 5, 2018.

As lovely and memorable as it is, however, this passage and the verses surrounding it arrive on the fourth Sunday in Lent with a significant amount of confusion, baggage, and misunderstanding – so much so that many of us preachers, no matter how much we value this passage, worry about how we will be able to unpack it in the allotted time for a Sunday morning sermon.

After all, this is the gospel of John and John does everything differently than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John's Jesus waxes eloquently and theologically, using metaphor after metaphor (I am the bread of life, I am living water, I am the good shepherd, I am the vine, etc.) to help us understand who he is in relation to God and to the world. Earlier in today's passage, Jesus encounters the Jewish leader Nicodemus under the cover of darkness, a detail most important to the gospel writer. Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he recognizes that something is different about him – something in his teaching, something in the signs he does – and these things move Nicodemus to an affirmation that Jesus is from God. In his fear, however, he seeks Jesus under the cover of darkness. He still has much to learn about who Jesus who is. He still has to come to an understanding of that which John claims about Jesus in the beginning of his gospel, that he is the true light that enlightens the world – the light that the darkness has not overcome (John 1:5, 9).

The theme of light and darkness appears again in our passage for today, as John compares those who believe in Jesus as those who walk in the light and those who do not believe as those who love the darkness.

It is important here to understand the difficulty in translating the Greek word *pisteow*. It is the verb form of the noun that means faith, and the English language does not have an exact verb form for the noun faith. John *only* uses the verb form of this word, which is translated as “believe” or “believing,” but really means something more like “faithing” in Jesus, or “to faith.” As you see, it doesn’t make much sense in English. Because of this imperfect translation of this Greek word, one preacher writes:

English readers now think that salvation is based on some general mental agreement that Jesus exists or died for us or is the Son of God or something of that nature. . . . [T]his misses the relational aspect . . .and also falls short of what the New Testament actually means by faith. [There is] a difference between [intellectual] belief and placing our past, present, and future in the hands of Jesus in order to seek first the kingdom.³

We could spend a whole lot of time on the semantics of this passage, and that would be a worthy study indeed, but in this shorter time-slot, I don’t want us to miss the power of John 3:16 and the verse that follows it, “for God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

In these two passages God is the actor and God is acting, in Jesus, out of love for us and for the sake of us. God loved the world. This is the crux of this passage and John’s gospel, I think. God loved the world.

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3550>, Doug Henkel, comment section, (accessed on 3-9-18).

The world? Really? The headlines this week are typical of any given week – school shootings, sexual abuse and misconduct, political in-fighting and tactical maneuvering, homelessness and hunger, opioid overdoses, racial inequities, the negative effects of poverty and race on health, education and opportunity, sex trafficking, attacks on immigrants - and I haven't even left North Carolina yet. It does seem that people love the darkness more than the light.

But the good news of this passage is that God loves *the world*. “This world,” writes Duffield. “God loves this world. God chooses not to condemn this world. God desires salvation and life eternal and abundance for this world.”⁴

This world. You and me and First Pres with all the ways we fall short of what God intends for us. The *world* and all of us who are “loving the darkness, exploiting the poor, abusing the vulnerable, pushing aside the weak, ridiculing the different, laughing at those who suffer,” and robbing people of abundant life as if it were our right to do so.

Deep down, this makes us uncomfortable, because we don't want God to love the *whole* world. It isn't fair. God's love should only be for those who deserve it, who have earned it, who are worthy. Right? It is only just. We should get what we deserve in this life, shouldn't we? We Americans are disciples of the poet William Ernest Henley, who said, “I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my own soul.” We are devout followers of Oprah, who believes that positive thinking and hard work lead to a happy

⁴ Duffield.

life. We don't want a God who loves us all the same, all unconditionally. We want a God who loves us fairly.

Kate Bowler, a professor at Duke Divinity School who has written a book (and a big one) on the prosperity gospel, found her own spiritual soundness called into question by her prosperity gospel friends when she was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer in her 30s. She knows that the prosperity gospel has an answer to her cancer. She must have turned away from God. This must be her fault. Cause and effect. Faithfulness leads to health and fullness of life. Unfaithfulness leads to cancer. In her most recent book *Everything Happens for a Reason*, she writes:

The prosperity gospel has a very simple way of explaining why life as it is must be inherently just. As it is told, God established a set of principles that keep the world in order . . . spiritual laws that steer the courses of lives and ensure that good things really do happen to good people. . . . Spiritual laws offer an elegant solution to the problem of unfairness. They create a Newtonian universe in which the chaos of the world seems reducible to simple cause and effect. The stories of people's lives can be plotted by whether or not they follow the rules. In this world there is no such thing as undeserved pain. There is no word for tragedy.⁵

⁵ Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*, (), 25-26

In the prosperity gospel, you *deserve* your pain in the same way you deserve your health, wealth, and prosperity. You have earned it! Good for you! Or sorry. You just got your just desserts. It is a fair way of understanding how God works in the world.

In this way of understanding gospel, we don't really need Jesus. The good news of this gospel is: we can save ourselves!

But friends, we know that is not the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ is far more profound, far more life-giving, far-more than we can control, and far more than we can comprehend.

As Amy read from Ephesians this morning, "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is a gift from God – not the result of works, that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Do you hear what that means? It means we can't earn our own salvation. We can't find light and life and hope and love on our own. We are dependent upon God. We ultimately cannot trust *ourselves* – we can only trust God. This means we are not in control. We are not in control?! We are not in control and it scares us to death.

[A]long comes life, or God, or destiny, or tragedy, or whatever you want to call it [writes David Lose], something that shakes us up, presents something utterly beyond our ability to cope, and drives us to our knees in despair--you know, like

the end of an important relationship, or the death of a loved one, or the return of illness, or the loss of a job-- and you realize in a flash of painful insight that you never were in control. Not of your life, not of circumstances or fate, and certainly not of God. And all of a sudden, this difficult, disturbing, even offensive message about God's grace becomes the best news you can imagine. Because here's the thing: precisely because we are *not* in control of God and therefore not in control of our relationship with God, we realize that it is the one relationship we can't blow, the one relationship that we can't screw up. God has taken responsibility for this one. And God has promised to bring it to a good end.

We are loved. It is light. It is enough.

Amen.

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Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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