

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 22, 2009

Amazing Grace Lutheran – Pastor Chip Wilke

John 3:14-21

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." (NIV)

What would you say if you were asked to give a short, clear, and concise statement about what you believe? How would you summarize your faith? What if someone came to you unexpectedly and started raising questions about your God and about salvation? What would you tell that person?

I am of the opinion that we couldn't do any better than what the apostle John, through the Holy Spirit, records for us today. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* John 3:16 is probably a passage in the Bible that most of us know by heart. We often call it the gospel in a nutshell. It is a message our children from little on can learn and understand. At the same time it reveals the love of our God that is beyond all human understanding. It is a message of truth we need to hear again and again, even though we may know it by memory. I pray we rejoice in: **The sweet, simple gospel.** I pray we listen to **the sweet, simple gospel.** I pray we believe **the sweet, simple gospel.** I pray we tell others **the sweet, simple gospel.**

An unexpected visitor came to Jesus under the cover of night. His name was Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council. He was of the group that had been coming up with one attack after another against Jesus. But at this late hour Nicodemus wants to learn more about this man who had turned water into wine and stormed through the temple driving out the money changers. Nicodemus raises some questions for Jesus concerning the kingdom of God. After Jesus talks to Nicodemus about his need for a new birth, Jesus now proclaims to Nicodemus the gospel in a nutshell.

Jesus introduces this short, sweet gospel message with a reminder of a familiar Old Testament story. To a young Jew growing up it was called The Brazen Serpent. We know it as the Bronze Snake. Jesus says: *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."* Israel complain to God in the desert. Israel sinned against God. God sent poisonous snakes. Many were bit. Many were dying. They deserved to die. But God in love did not want them to perish so it was necessary for God to intervene. God's

miraculous cure for people who could not save themselves was to have Moses lift up a bronze snake on a pole that all who looked on it might live and be saved.

That bronze snake is a type or a picture of Christ. So it is necessary, Jesus says, that ***“the Son of Man must be lifted up.”*** It is necessary because we have been poisoned by sin. We complain against God. We, along with all the people in this world, sin against God. We too deserve to die. Because of our sins we will die. But God, in love, did not want us to perish forever. So God provides a miraculous cure for people who can't save themselves so that all may live. The cure is Jesus. He was lifted up on the cross with the sins of all people that all who look to Him in faith may be saved from the deadly poison of sin and may have eternal life.

Now with clear & concise, with sweet and simple, words Jesus declares: ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*** It all starts with God who loves with a one-sided, self sacrificing, unconditional agape love. Yes, this is the same God who hates sin and punishes sin. Yet, His love is that much greater that he doesn't want His people to perish. He loves the world. Think about that statement for a moment. God so loved this world. Look at this world. Think about all the evil people that have lived in this world. Turn on the news. Look at all the people in it and see how wicked they are. Look into our own hearts and see how evil we are. But God loves, with an agape love, us all. The great Bible translator Richard Baxter once said that if the name “Richard Baxter” appeared in John 3:16 saying God so loved Richard Baxter, he might wonder if another man by the name of Richard Baxter were meant. But what comfort there is in the words God so loved the world - that surely includes every Richard Baxter. When God says He loved the world that surely includes you and me.

God's love is one that takes action. His love does something for us - something amazing. Say I brought two of you up front here this morning and one of you had to pay for your sins in hell. Now if one of the two of you I brought up here was my only son and I had to decide, I'm sorry but you would lose. My son would be watching basketball with me this afternoon and playing with me. Not that I don't love all of you, but that is my son and I really love my son.

It is harder to think of a stronger union and a greater love than that of God the Father and God the Son. But on the stage of Calvary there stood these two parties - the Son of God, and every human being. Jesus was holy and pure; all humanity sinful and corrupt. But God said to His Son on the cross ***“You lose. Their shame and rejection and hell and death are yours.”*** God gave His Son, His only begotten Son, for the world. That's how much God loved the world – that's how much God loves you! That's how far God went to keep the world from perishing.

By Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for the world all sin is paid for and heaven is open to everyone. ***“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”*** Now God's verdict on Judgment Day will be a simple one. ***“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”*** All who believe in Jesus as their Savior have eternal life. There is only one sin that now lands people in hell – unbelief. Just like God did when He had Moses put the snake on the pole, God holds Jesus before sin-cursed dying sinners and

says: *“Look to Him and live.”* This is the short, sweet gospel. This is the message that is the power of God and the news that makes us alive even when we were dead.

Jesus could not make it any clearer to Nicodemus when it came to questions about God and salvation. In a powerful summary He points this Pharisee to the love of God. He proclaims the short, sweet gospel. This man who came under the cover of night went on to be a believer in the daylight. Nicodemus openly showed his faith as he asked for permission to take Jesus’ body down from the cross and helped lay it into the tomb.

We too have once again heard the good news. Again this Lent we see how much God loves the world. We see how much Jesus loves us as He goes to the cross to pay for our sins. We by grace, through faith – which too is a gift from God, believe in Jesus and are saved. Dear friends, let us go now be believers in the daylight. Let us go rejoicing in, and telling others the short sweet, gospel. ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*** Amen.