

Lent 4B 2024 John 3:14-21

We're going to start with a little quiz this morning—fill in the blank: One bad apple *spoils the barrel*. Great minds think alike, *though fools rarely differ*. Curiosity killed the cat, *but satisfaction brought it back*. The early bird gets the worm, *but the second mouse gets the cheese*. Jack of all trades, *but master of none, though oftentimes better than master of one*. It makes a difference to know the whole proverb instead of stopping halfway through. This is also why it's important to read scripture in its full context; the same principle applies. The scriptures were first written down without chapters and verses, without punctuation or distinct upper and lower case letters, some of it even without vowels that change the meaning of the words. It's an act of translation just to decide where to end one sentence and begin another, so it's that much easier to misunderstand scripture if we're in the habit of quoting, cross-stitching, or spray painting single verses or citations. That's true of even of the famous John 3:16.

John's gospel this morning is the end of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, the curious Pharisee who visits under the cover of darkness after Jesus drove the animals and money-changers out of the temple. Jesus talks to Nicodemus about being born again, but Nicodemus, taking Jesus literally, misunderstands. We might conclude that Nicodemus eventually comes to understand Jesus better, or at least continues trying to learn from him, since Nicodemus is the leader who argues for a fair trial for Jesus and, at his death, brings 100 pounds of oil to anoint his body. By then, part of the prophecy that Jesus speaks here would have been accomplished: the Son of Man had been lifted up on the cross. However, Jesus will also be lifted up in the resurrection and the ascension. Like the Israelites in the wilderness looked at a snake on a pole so that they wouldn't die from their snakebites, Jesus will be lifted up in crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension so that those who look to him will live.

*For 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.* That sounds like it should be good news, yet this verse often gets twisted to mean that God sent Jesus not to invite us to eternal life but as the gatekeeper to keep people from it. What Jesus did *not* say is *For God so loved the minority of the earth's inhabitants who happened to be born in Christian cultures that God sent his Son so that everyone who checks the box that says "Christian" will go to heaven and everyone else will be eternally out of luck.* It doesn't say that, but that's often how it's treated. If Jesus came just to be a religious test, then his coming would mean condemnation as much as salvation, depending on how one responds. But the very next verse claims: *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* See how important it is to read beyond the one verse that everyone knows? Why does Jesus come? Not to condemn but to save. And who gets saved? The world.

Still, we have to ask what Jesus means when he talks about being saved. Some Christians treat salvation as if it's only about what happens after we die. But in context, Jesus' contemporaries did not understand the afterlife as a dichotomy between the heaven as our popular culture portrays it in books and TV shows and hell as it's depicted in medieval art or modern horror films. There wasn't a theological consensus on life after death; the Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed about the resurrection. The Pharisees were the ones who believed in bodily resurrection, yet even they weren't trying to figure out how to get into heaven but how God wanted them to live their first century lives. Jesus says very little about life after death but quite a lot about the way God wants us to live now.

Jesus doesn't need to come into the world to condemn the world; look around—we're a hot mess all on our own. We condemn ourselves when we act in ways inconsistent with God's commands, whether we ascribe to creedal statements about Jesus or not. This is why Jesus can say *those who do not believe are condemned already*—not because they've sealed their fate for an afterlife of eternal torment by not confessing that Jesus is Lord, but because if someone doesn't believe that Jesus' way of living reflects God's will, then they won't follow him in living that way themselves. Eternal life is what it sounds like: no end *and* no beginning, which means we're already living it. We're either already following the way of God that Jesus reveals—charity, mercy, selfless service, striving for justice—or we're already not living like Jesus.

Here and throughout John's gospel, Jesus says believing in him is the way to know God the Father and experience eternal life. But to Jesus, *believing* is not merely giving intellectual assent to Christian doctrine or reciting the creeds without crossing our fingers behind our backs. If we believe that Jesus embodied the will of God, that Jesus did what God wants human beings to do, then we'll at least try to follow his example and teaching. If we believe Jesus was the one God sent, then we'll trust him not to lead us astray. And if we follow his example and his teaching, then we're already participating in, even helping to build, the human community as God intended it to be. Jesus healed people, fed people, ate with socially undesirable people, washed feet, turned the other cheek, and even forgave his enemies from the cross. God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to do all that, and if we believe in him enough to do those things too, then we will be living the life God wants us to live.

There's nothing wrong with John 3:16—not with memorizing it, quoting it, or cross-stitching it on pillows. But if we recite it as if it's the password that gets us into the afterlife club, we're missing the rest of the story. God loved us and everyone around us enough to come in person to show us how to live. Jesus invites us to believe that he was living out God's righteousness, to trust him enough to follow his way of life, and by doing that, to start living eternal life in the light of God ourselves, now.