

Good News!

King of Glory Lutheran Church

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Year B: Lent 4: John 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“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. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Law: There is brokenness, darkness, even evil in the world. It was true for the ancient Jews and is true for us today. The snakes were making people die.

Gospel: Through God’s direction, the snake on the pole brought Life. Jesus brings life. We do not have to be condemned (letting the snakes kill us N.T.) Jesus proved it over and over again with the people He interacted with.

Our response is to keep witnessing to the Light – God’s life and light.

Whoever believes in Him! Amen

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.

This is it! This one Bible verse is what we call, ‘the Good News.’ It summarizes all four Gospels in 27 words. God so loved...gave his only Son...whoever believes in Him...eternal life! This is the Good News of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

For we sitting here in the sanctuary, who have heard the stories of Jesus for a long time, this promise brings great comfort. We are assured of our life with God not only here on earth, but also for the life hereafter.

Not everyone has heard this verse with such comfort. It has been used as condemnation. “If you don’t believe in the Lord Jesus Christ...well then...”

Alicia Vargas' husband, came to Christian faith and was baptized as an adult. He always saw John 3:16 "as a "believe it or else" warning sign, like the "Jesus or hell" sign(s) we see on freeway overpass". Those signs would just push him further and further away from faith and church. (What did work for him, [he has told me,] was a gently shared story of faith from one of his coworkers at a part-time job when he was in college.)¹

And there are some of our Christian brothers and sisters who believe in decision theology. Perhaps some of you were raised with this theology. In order to be saved, one has to pray the right prayer and be able to name the date one accepts Jesus. God bless them, truly, for taking evangelism seriously, to make disciples. *And* handing a four-point tract to a non-believer doesn't work for everyone.

I've gotten a chuckle a few years during our annual Bazaar. Upon entering the restroom or on a table in the Fellowship Room, I've found those four-point tracts randomly laying around the church. I don't know who does it, but I really wonder what they think we believe! Maybe we're worshipping snakes!

Well, it does have to do with snakes actually. In the Numbers passage we just heard, God's people were grumbling against God. Therefore, God sent a plague of snakes to bite them. In the surrounding Canaanite cultures, as in some other world religions, the goddess of life was imaged as a serpent. Thus, to oppose devotion to other deities, in the Bible the serpent is used to signify evil. God instructs Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole and whoever looks at it will live. A snake lifted up. Death – exalted as it were – now brings life. It's a paradox, death brings life.

The same human greed and pride that was evident in the story from Numbers, is still evident today. There is darkness. There is an absence of light. There is what we can call evil. Jesus will hang on the cross, taking the weight of all the sin and evil in the world upon Himself. Through His death, Jesus will bring life. It's a paradox. We do not have to be condemned by sin or brokenness. By believing in Jesus, we too have Life.

That whoever believes in him...so that everyone who believes in Him... will have life.

While He was alive, Jesus proved this over and over again. Jesus interactions regularly took Him outside accepted society. Remember the woman at the well? A Samaritan – the enemy of the Jews? Jesus says to her, 'Look, it's not about the five husbands you've had. It's not about Jews worshipping at the Temple in

Jerusalem and you not being able to go there. Life with God is about God accepting you and asking you to worship in Spirit and truth!’ That was not only Good News for this woman, it was life-changing news! She was accepted and loved and forgiven.

Remember the man born blind? Jesus would have taken on the blind man’s uncleanness when putting the mud on his eyes. But Jesus does so anyway. The religious people hassle the formerly blind man about the incident. And when he finally meets up with Jesus again, he confesses his belief in the Messiah. (John Ch 9) From ‘unclean’ to ‘clean’. From ‘blind’ and in the dark to ‘seeing the light.’ What Good News!

Whoever believes in Him. God doesn’t put parameters around who can or cannot believe in God. God always draws the circle bigger. God never makes it smaller.

Black leader Mary MacLeod Bethune (1875–1955), who grew up as a young girl in the Jim Crow South and whom Allen Dwight Callahan describes as “educator, activist, and presidential advisor,” writes:

With these words [John 3:16] the scales fell from my eyes and the light came flooding in. My sense of inferiority, my fear of handicaps, dropped away. “Whosoever,” it said. No Jew nor Gentile, no Catholic nor Protestant, no black nor white; just “whosoever.” It means that I, a humble Negro girl, had just as much chance as anybody in the sight and love of God. These words stored up a battery of faith and confidence and determination in my heart, which has not failed me to this day.ⁱⁱ

Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world but in order the world might be saved through Him. God always draws the circle bigger. Whosoever. Whosoever. Now isn’t that Good News?!

Neither Jew nor Gentile

Neither Catholic or Protestant or conservative Evangelical or those of no faith

Neither Black, or White, or Brown or Asian

Neither straight nor gay

Neither Republican or Democrat or Independent

Neither legal or illegal

Neither whatever category we like or dislike. John 3:16 says... “Whoever believes in Jesus...that’s Good News!”

This God who came to earth...the One who has seen God and is God...this God, Jesus offers life through His death. Offers life here and now, and life in the world to come. Offers forgiveness and belief in His name through the Holy Spirit, not through our striving to believe.

“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” Paul writes in Romans 8. “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.” This is Good News! We cannot come to believe in Christ Jesus or confess Him as Lord without God living within. This too is all about God. This is Good News!

We don’t need a day and time that we accepted Jesus in our hearts. God chose us before we chose God. Jesus died on Calvary – He hung on that cross – so that whoever believes in Him will live. This means that belief doesn’t have to come in an instant. It can come as an adult. Or over a life-time. Or on a death bed. And could it be...could it be that the grace of God extends even into death itself?

I know that many of you have children and grandchildren that don’t go to church. You’re worried about them. You wish for them the life Jesus can bring to them, now. The Good News of Jesus Christ is that God will keep wooing them, keep calling them and working on their hearts. Your job is to keep praying and talking about how God changes your life, now.

May we never use John 3:16 for condemnation. Can we – you and I continue to witness to the light and life that a dying man’s body witnesses to? Can we – you and I – continue to speak out against brokenness, darkness, evil in all its forms? So that...all people...whoever they are...wherever they live...whatever they’ve done, can experience this Good News for themselves. Can we? I just wonder...amen!

ⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-john-314-21-6>.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-john-314-21-6>. Quoted in Allen Dwight Callahan, “The Gospel of John,” in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), where it is in turn quoted from Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 136.