



“Lifted Up”

a sermon by

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Our text this afternoon comes from John 3:14-21. It is the final words of Jesus' discourse to Nicodemus- which he begins by telling Nicodemus that no one could see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Nicodemus, of course, has no idea what Jesus is talking about, and so Christ continues, saying that you must be born of the Spirit, and then begins to talk about heaven and the Son of Man. To illustrate his point he calls up an image from Israel's history- of Moses healing the people in the wilderness. "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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. 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. Those 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. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But 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."

This text contains the very well known John 3:16 passage that we're as likely to encounter on a billboard or a bumper sticker or on a piece of poster board at a ball game as we are in the Bible: "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."

A popular summary of the faith that has also provided more than enough fodder for some fiery sermons about just how this whole salvation thing is going to play itself out eternally and what that means for how we are to live our lives today.

My brother in law and his wife shared that they got to giggling recently during Sunday morning worship while visiting a Baptist church in the north GA mountains. The minister was preaching this text in a way that sounds like it would have made Jonathan Edwards proud which was great, but what got them laughing was that it had apparently inspired the small boy of about 6 in the pew directly in front of them to tear his bulletin into thin strips and with them spell out in all caps the word 'HELL' on the table he'd made on his lap with his hymnbook.

After contemplating his masterpiece for a moment, he then pulled out a plastic Jesus action figure who came swooping in from the friendship pad and scrambled up all the pieces of his word- destroying 'HELL'! Which is some pretty solid theology actually.

There are a hundred or more sermons that you could preach on this text, mostly because John's gospel rarely allows for there to be only one moral to any given story because his entire book is filled with layers upon layers of meaning and narrative that build on each other. So, for example, this passage comes at the end of the story of Nicodemus that brings up issues of what is in the light before all and what is hidden in darkness- here is a Jew who came in the middle of the night to ask Jesus a question, struggling with what is hidden from others (namely his interest in Jesus)- and what is exposed to the reader and to Christ but hidden to himself, which was his need to stop living his life in the shadows of sin and uncertainty, and to take the plunge and follow Christ.

And this story was built on the chapters before it that say that Jesus was the Word, and the word was with God and the light of all people. The light shone in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome.

And then there is our passage that says that “this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”

So we can certainly take this last statement at face value and derive a lot of meaning. But couple it with the theological reality that to be in the light is to be in Jesus- the light of the world- and therefore with God,

and the story of this man who is genuinely struggling to put such competing priorities to rest within himself, illuminating the very real wrestling within ourselves that takes place as we strive to ourselves come out of the shadows and let God in- and the statement has a lot more punch-

“this is the judgment- that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light...” So John challenges us to see that while this story may have something to say about the end of times, it also has a word for us today.

And while it is Lent and I’m a Calvinist and we can certainly talk about our total depravity and sin and redemption and the all caps HELL I can’t help but think that John is also challenging us to think about these things not just in an eternal sense, but in an internal sense as well.

“This is the judgment - light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light”- essentially, he says, people are perishing as we speak when they harbor those places deep within themselves where they do not let the light of God’s love shine. And therefore do not fully receive the gift that is being freely given by one who in the immensity of his love for us has sacrificed everything only so that that gift could be ours.

We condemn ourselves when we prefer separation from God to intimacy. When we desire for there to be only darkness so that no one can see what we are up to rather than being willing to expose ourselves- sinful and ugly though we may be- to the light and risk what will feel like judgment but, paradoxically, will actually bring healing.

So the question John asks is not how are you going to read your scripture, but how will you let scripture read you.

We can read scripture to try and get a road map to our eternal salvation. But John doesn’t just want us to be changed with Jesus on some great and glorious day in the hereafter. He wants us to open ourselves up to transformation now.

So can we hear this text challenging us to overcome darkness within our hearts. To uproot sin, and bring whatever it is- be it sin in the things we have done or in that which we have left undone- to light.

John is inviting us to participate in Christ’s experience of suffering and glory on the cross by being lifted up ourselves- by being at once lifted up to exposure and vulnerability to God’s light because we are sinful and ashamed, and in that humbling act, amazingly and simultaneously being lifted up and exalted by God because of our surrender to God’s grace.

The verb used here for lifted up by John can be used interchangeably for lift up as on a stake and lift up as in exalt. We are invited not just to walk with Jesus, but in our own pain, humility, and honesty to go to the cross ourselves and put to death by lifting up to God the things in the darkness that are trying their best to keep God at a distance, so that we can be lifted up with Christ and taste the true joy and freedom of being saved from death and judgment now.

‘This is the judgment’ as it plays itself out not just eternally but in real time - that life is available to us now in the light of Christ- but we persist in choosing darkness and living the misery of its consequences- anxiety, fear, isolation, and tormented separation from God and wondering where he is at rather than in joy, peace, community, and love by abiding in him.

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” Jesus says. It is actually a somewhat obscure story from the book of Numbers that Jesus references to set the stage for helping Nicodemus understand what kind of lifting up he was referring to.

Out there in the wilderness after they had received the 10 commandments from Moses on Sinai, the chosen people Israel are wandering once again, and once again, they succumb to the temptation of complaining to God. ‘What are we doing here, where are we going, where are you? We don’t have any food- ok, we have this manna that you gave us, actually- so we hate the food. You just brought us out here to die.’

And God gets so angry with Israel that he sends a pack of poisonous snakes into their camp to kill them. Many people are bitten and die. So they realize their sinfulness in being unfaithful by trying to have things their own way rather than surrendering to God’s way, petition to Moses, who intercedes to God on their behalf.

And in order for the people to be saved, God does not take away the snakes, but tells Moses to fashion a replica of one of the serpents and to raise it up on a pole. And so he does- he makes a serpent out of bronze and lifts it up.

And God tells the people that all that those who have been bitten have to do is to just look at the snake and be healed. That was it. And all of a sudden what was the source of their judgment becomes the source of their healing. The venom becomes the antidote. And the object of fear becomes the means of salvation.

Israel is not so terminally ill in her sinfulness that God cannot still give life because there are no boundaries on God’s love. No limit to the ways he will forever reach down to lift us up out of the mire. Even if it means transforming the means of punishment he has for us into an instrument of grace. Disarming and humbling himself so that we can be saved.

And so it is with Christ. Who alone is in the position to judge and condemn us. And yet who was lifted up on a plank of wood for all the world to see so that, by simply fixing our eyes on him God makes it so that it is as if we have never sinned at all. So that when he was lifted up out of the depths of hell into the light of God’s embrace, we were lifted up with him into glory too.

So why would we now live as those who are still in darkness? Why impose the judgment upon ourselves that has already been resolved in Jesus? is the question that Christ puts before

Nicodemus and the apostle Paul would put before virtually every church he helped to plant and the gospel writer John puts before us now.

Our sinful nature has not changed, but our understanding of the character of God has. God is love. And that changes everything. Even death and so it should especially change life.

So if we really believe this than John 3:16- “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” is not just a calling card for our religion or a slogan for drive-by evangelism, or fuel for fiery sermons, it is an actual program for the church to follow as she seeks to bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ.

For if we live out the saving reality of a God who loves the world so sacrificially that there is no length that he will not go to lift his people out of the darkness of their despair not just with his words but with his own life sparing no personal expense, then in seeing the selfless sacrifice of such love, in seeing what they thought was an instrument of judgment be transformed into an instrument of healing grace and love, in seeing our own recognition that, in fact, we are all stuck in the mire of our sinfulness but there in the depths is Christ with us suffering until we can all embrace every last bit of life that he is dying for us to claim - then the world will see our Lord. And we will all come out from the shadows together. We are in Lent but Christ is already through Holy Week and beyond the grave and waiting to be born anew every day. So let's not keep him on the cross, but concede to God's activity in us by lifting our hearts with all that they hold up to him. So that in this light it may be clearly seen that all that we are and everything that we do is done in God. Amen.