

John 3:14-21 “The Temptation of Despair”

At First Christian Church, we believe in proclaiming the Good News! It's what Jesus told us to do. But sometimes you've got to get a handle on bad news before you can proclaim Good News. So buckle up because we need to take ride downhill before we talk about how God can lift us up. Did you know that about 12.5 percent of US citizens live below the poverty level? That's about 45 million people. That's one out of eight people. 25 million Americans do not believe they will be able to retire. Although our unemployment rate is doing pretty well (4.1% compared to almost 10% in 2010), the number of people who are *underemployed* ... in other words, employed but unable to make ends meet or to set aside money for retirement or savings because their jobs are part-time with no benefits ... is 12.5%. Which is about the same amount as people living below the poverty level.

You've all heard about “The American Dream” right? It's a term coined in 1931 by a historian named James Truslow Adams. The basic premise is that most people in America can look forward to an increasingly affluent lifestyle in an endlessly growing national economy. In other words, perpetual upward mobility. Work hard, go to college and get a good education and you'll be better off than your parents. And think about *when* Adams said this! He said this two years after the stock market crash that started The Great Depression! The world was right in the middle of a global financial crisis that went on until about 1941, and he said, “Oh yeah, this American Dream can happen!” And for many people it did. It started in the 1940s and really picked up after World War II. It went on through the “Happy Days” of the 1950s. The Builder Generation and their kids the Boomer Generation lived a life where you could get out of school, go to work for a reliable company, work there until you retired with good health insurance and a pension. Then things got complicated. By the time Generation X entered the work force, there were signs that the American Dream was fading. There were folks who were working as hard if not harder than their parents, but they still couldn't achieve their parents' level of income or security.

And this left a lot of people feeling bewildered, doubtful and insecure. They were afraid that any little slip-up could cause their family to fall through the cracks in the social sidewalk. Despair started knocking on people's doors. During this Lenten season, we've been talking about the temptations we face as we seek to walk the path of Jesus. This morning I want to talk about the temptation to open that door when we hear despair knocking.

When we face the temptation to give into despair, we often switch over to Desperation Mode. Desperation Mode is when we start to sacrifice our time, and energy and well-being into maintaining a grip on what has sustained us in the past. We want to hold on to our income sources so we can still consume at the same rate we're used to. And it doesn't help when you've got a multi-billion dollar advertising industry constantly assuring us that frantic schedules and rampant consumerism are virtues to be admired and cultivated. But at the same time, this still small voice starts to whisper to us. It says, "You are sacrificing your health ... your *bodies*. You are dulling your spirits. You are turning your back on your communities ... shoot ... on the very planet you call home! You are in trouble!" But a lot of folks just can't get their heads wrapped around the enormity of these dangers we face. And because we can't see a way out, we either find ways to numb ourselves against the anxiety or we scramble and run even harder. Then we wonder why there's an opioid crisis that claims 115 lives a day.

But since we can't seem to find an alternative, we just plough ahead on the same path. We just keep on scrambling to get that promotion, renovate that house, pay off that mortgage and get those kids into the right schools in the hopes that it will somehow make things worthwhile in the end even though there's a part of us that doubts it will. Why? Because we're constantly reminded of the social, relational and personal breakdowns that we see as a result of all this anxiety. Thanks Jesse. You have painted a remarkably clear picture about how awful things are. Could we move on please?

Yes. Let's go to our gospel reading -- Jesus said, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." There. Thanks. That *is* a good word of hope. Makes me want to hold up a "John 3:17" banner at a football game just to be different. But in this passage Jesus *also* said, "Those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Hold that one up at a ballgame and see what happens! Well preacher your little ray of sunshine was good while it lasted. Well, let's do what we Disciples do best. Let's see how we can make sense of the good news. First of all, Jesus does *not* say that those who do not believe are condemned for not believing. He says that those who do not believe are *condemned already*. And he does not say that they are condemned *by God*. Again, he says that they are *condemned already*. And when we hold that idea up against the despair of watching a world hell-bent on its own destruction, it makes sense.

A very common misunderstanding of the gospel is that salvation is all about doing what we need to do to stop God from being angry with us and destroying us. Are we on a road to destruction? Yes. It's our nature. But the forces that *are* seeking to destroy us are *not* initiatives of God. They're mostly of our *own* making. Sure they *feel* a whole lot bigger than our own making! They've taken on a life of their own. They're like a big black hole that's sucking everything into itself. But as huge as it may be, it's *not* God's doing. It's not something that God casts us into as a punishment for something we've done wrong. It is the crisis from which God wants to save us. And God is always ready and willing to do so.

"God so loves the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." There's John 3:16! We knew you'd get to that sometime this morning! "God so loves the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." That is to say, God's

love for the world is so overwhelming that even giving up his own son was not too great a cost to ensure that no one needs to surrender to death. All those who put their trust in him can have boundless life instead. That's not the story of a God who's ready to condemn us and cast us into hell if we don't get it right. God is overwhelmingly motivated by love for us. It's the kind of love that will risk *plunging into* the black hole to try to pull us out, even if it means dying in the attempt. We do not have the kind of lunatic God who in a fit of anger creates the black hole and then tries to pull us out at the same time. If God does nothing, we are all condemned. Not condemned by God, but condemned to death. A living death in a hell of our own making. One of fear, desperation, self-destruction and ... despair.

But the good news ... the news you've been waiting to hear ... is that God doesn't do nothing. That's bad English but good theology. Out of love for us, God is willing to risk everything to bring us home safely. And there is nothing we can do to earn that salvation either. Nor is there anything we can do to make God stop trying. As Ephesians 2:8 says, "It is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." It's a gift. God does not have a check list of those worth saving and those that God is happy to abandon. That might seem like bad news if you were hoping that God sees you as more worthy of saving than Jeffery Dahmer, but it will be good news if you realize that God sees you every bit as worth saving as Mother Teresa. God just sees that we're all in desperate need.

But here's another common misconception about salvation. Sometimes we imagine that salvation is some sort of individual registration process. We make contact with Jesus, we say what we think he wants to hear, and then we get our names transferred onto the list of the saved. Because with that kind of image, we find ourselves still being sucked mercilessly down into the black hole of self-destruction. All we've done is make ourselves feel a little better because we've enrolled in some sort of divine insurance plan that's still got a pretty big deductible. It's like, "Oh, sure, we're still going to get sucked into the black hole, but when

we come out on the other side, there's cookies waiting for us!" But God is not in the insurance policy business. God is mounting a cosmic rescue mission. God is wanting to pull us out of the darkness into the light *before* we are dragged under.

So Jesus comes to us, reaching out to us and calling us into the light. But, as Jesus said in our reading, "this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light." And that's a sad thing. Because lot of the time we don't really want to leave the darkness. It might be killing us, but we've become rather attached to its familiarity. And all we really want is for Jesus to hand us a candle so that we can have our own little bit of light to help us cope with the plunge into the black hole. A little bit of light as a kind of palliative care pain-killer as we get sucked in. But Jesus isn't the least bit interested in "helping us cope" with the darkness. Jesus is calling us into the light. Jesus is seeking to rescue us from the darkness entirely. But most of us are still fearful of the light. Wow ... this light is just ... too weird. Too bright. Too uncomfortable. And we are way too addicted to our old ways. We keep hoping for a little light to shine into our darkness rather than experience a radical relocation *into* the light. And this isn't just an individual story, this is our whole society. We know that war only creates more war, but we keep fighting them. We know that polluting the air is suffocating us, but we keep doing it. We know that keeping up with the Jones' is destroying our souls, but we keep running on the treadmill to keep up. We as the church are called to be people of the light and it's our job to show the world how to live in that light. For God so loves the world, and the light has come into the world, and all who put their trust in the light will be saved and have boundless, unquenchable life. That is the good news we are called to proclaim. That is the good news we are called to live when despair is knocking at the door.