

March 14th, 2021

John 3:14-21 “Grace When It Counts”

Let's talk about salvation today. If you ask any preacher for a top ten list of questions that people ask them, the topic of salvation is at least in the top 3. “Preacher, how do I know if I'm saved?” “Preacher, what if my wife, husband, child, mom, great aunt, neighbor, second cousin twice removed *isn't* saved? How do they know? How do *I* know?” I get a little confused, though, when the questions start sounding like algebra equations. “So let's say that my grandfather was a Christian, but he married a Buddhist, but their son ... that's my daddy ... was an atheist who married a Mormon from the Pacific Islands who converted to Islam after she met a Druid who worked at the Synagogue on 3rd street. If I decide to go to a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church does that mean I'm saved or not?” Here's my favorite - “Preacher, if I've spent my life drinking, doing drugs, partying, lying, cheating, stealing and being a mean ol' jerk, and then I confess that Jesus is my Lord and Savior on my death bed, that means I'll be saved, right?” It gets a little tedious sometimes. But it always strikes me as funny that out of all the things that people *could* be curious about as far as religion or faith goes, they want to make sure they are *saved*. But I guess that's no surprise because self-preservation *is* part of our primal human instinct. We want to make sure we and our loved ones will be okay and that we'll be safe and taken care of.

In our gospel reading this morning, we heard Jesus say that “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be *saved* through him.” Okay. Well, there's the word right there! “Saved.” It stands to reason that the next question would be, “From what?” Then in the next sentence we read, “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.” Whew. And this is only a few verses after the most memorized passage in the Bible: “For God so loved the world that he gave us his only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have

everlasting life.” I think we need to clarify some things if we’re going to discover the good news in this passage.

First of all, this does *not* say that those who do not believe are condemned for *not believing*. It says that those who do not believe are condemned *already*. Well, that doesn’t sound very good either. Okay, but let’s look at something even more important here - It does not say that they are condemned *by God*. Again, they are condemned *already*. So when we hold *that* idea up against the kind of world we live in ... one that often seems hell-bent on its own destruction ... this passage makes more sense.

A very common misunderstanding of the idea of salvation is that it’s all about doing what we need to do to stop an angry God from wanting to destroy us. See, there are *plenty* of things that are seeking to destroy us, but the important thing to know is that they are *not* directed by God. The things that seek to destroy us are mostly of our own making. I understand that these things feel much bigger than our own making, because they always seem to take on a life of their own. They become a massive and seemingly unstoppable cultural black hole sucking everything into itself. But as huge as it may be, it is *not* God. And it is *not* something that God casts us into as some sort of punishment for something we’ve done wrong. No, that black hole of things that seeks to destroy us is the very crisis from which God wants to save us. And, I might add, God is always ready and willing to do so.

Why? Here we go - “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 is to say, God’s love for the world is so overwhelming that even giving up God’s own son is not too much of a price to make sure we don’t get sucked in to that which seeks to destroy us. All those who put their trust in Jesus can have boundless life instead. See, this is not the story of a God who is ready to condemn us or to cast us into hell if we don’t get it right. God is overwhelmingly motivated by love for us. 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 God who creates the black hole in a fit of anger and then tries to pull us out of it at the same time. The truth of the matter is that *if God does nothing*, we are all condemned. Not condemned by God, but condemned to a living death in a hell of our own making; a hell of spiralling darkness, of desperation, of fear, and self-destruction.

But the good news is that God does *not* do nothing. Out of an overwhelming love for us, God plunges in to save us, to rescue us, to bring us safely home. And there is nothing we can do to earn God's favor to save us, and nothing we can do to make God stop trying. It is, as the Apostle Paul says, "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." It is a *gift*. God does not have a check list of those worth saving and those who God is happy to abandon to their fate. That might seem like bad news if you were hoping that God sees you as more worthy of saving than Ted Bundy, but it will be good news if you realize that God sees you as every bit as much worth saving as Mother Theresa. God recognizes our desperate need, with no distinctions at all, and plunges into the vortex to rescue whoever can be rescued. See? Good news!

But there's another common misconception about salvation that I can't leave without mentioning today. This has to do with the *nature* of God's rescue mission. Too often we imagine salvation as some kind of registration process like when we sign up with the county to get our COVID vaccines. We convince ourselves that we go to Heaven's website, click on "contact Jesus," fill out a form and say what we think he wants to hear, so we can get our names transferred onto the list of the "saved." And with that kind of image, we find ourselves *still* being sucked *mercilessly* down into the black hole of the world's self-destruction. And all we've done is make ourselves feel a little better about it by signing up for some kind of insurance policy that says that we can hold a little flashlight while we get sucked into the big black hole. But then just as we get crushed by the weight of the black hole's gravity, we get sucked out on the other side where there will be cookies

waiting for us. But God is not in the business of marketing insurance policies. God is organizing a cosmic rescue mission. God is wanting to pull us out of the darkness into the light before we're dragged under.

So Jesus comes to us, reaching out to us and calling us into the light. But, as Jesus said, "this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light." Most of us are caught not really wanting to leave the darkness. It might even be killing us, but we've become rather attached to it. It may even feel comforting or familiar. And maybe all we really *want* is for Jesus to hand us the little flashlight so that we can have our own little bit of brightness to help us cope with the trip to the black hole. Here's some good news for you - Jesus is not the least bit interested in helping us *cope* with the darkness. Jesus is calling us into the light, seeking to *rescue* us from the darkness entirely. But most of us are still fearful of the light.

Here's an observation that I've made over the course of 54 years on earth and three months short of 25 years of ordained ministry. We humans are addicted to the ways of our past. We keep hoping for a little light to shine in our darkness instead of a radical relocation into the light. This is not 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 burning fossil fuels at the rate we are is suffocating us, but we keep digging them up and using them. We know that the modern dream of every family with their own house full of every possible consumer appliance is strangling our world and destroying our souls, but we keep running ever harder on the treadmill to keep up.

God is not hating us for it, or wanting to punish us or condemn us, but the inconvenient truth is that we're condemned already if we keep ignoring that light that Jesus keeps calling us to. And I'm struggling to know how to finish this sermon because I'm just as caught up in it as everyone else, and I long for the light but find myself as often as not clinging to my comfortable bit of darkness and numbing myself to the obvious. And we as a church are called to be a people of the light, one of

the great pools of light into which people can step in and be saved from the darkness. But the truth is that we, like most churches, are struggling to find any meaningful way of creating the support systems by which we can help one another stand true and not slide back into the black hole.

I don't always know how to put the answers into practice. All I know is that it is only as we fall to our knees in prayer and hold out our hands to one another to give and receive the bread and cup which are the light of the world that we have got any chance to find the way of living in the light together. 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 life; boundless, unquenchable life.