

"Preach like you know they almost didn't come."

Good morning st. John's. good morning to you Lord. My we please you today in thanksgiving for showing up in our lives.

This is not a passage that I relish preaching about. God so loved the world. Blah blah blah. That is how I feel about these words sometimes. It is most likely the most quoted text in the Bible. It is also quoted completely out of context which I find troubling. By quoting this without understanding the context can be problematic. So while my natural instinct was to ignore today's gospel and preach about something else, I decided to 'go for the gusto' and perhaps some of you will have second thoughts about having "John 3:16" tattooed somewhere on your person. A question to ask ourselves at this juncture might be 'why is this passage so popular?' is it because we want to be assured that God really does love the world? Or is it because we

want the world to know that by believing in Jesus we have the inside track to salvation and the rest of the world is going to hell in a handbasket? In other words Ha, Ha, I am saved but all those other people are not. If God so loves the world that he sent Jesus to redeem us why would he then condemn most of it? Because here is some news: most of the world is not Christian. In actuality only around 30% of the world population is Christian. These words of Jesus were in a context of teaching. First, Nicodemus, and then others that were present. So what did Jesus meant to say and what is John saying to us?

I love the way John uses the serpent and the image of the staff of Moses. The same serpent that was condemned to slither on the ground was elevated to be the image of healing of healing for God's people. Just so, Jesus must redeem Adam by being elevated to be the healing image for all humankind. Over time the serpent became an idol worshipped (2kings 18:4)

which to me demonstrates even further how necessary it was for Jesus to be 'lifted up' as the ultimate image of redemption.

There is no doubt in my mind that God loves the world. I feel pretty safe in saying that the intent of John's message in telling this story is not to say that those who do not believe are condemned for eternity. I think that John is trying to make sense of why some people who hear Jesus come into the light of belief and some choose to stay in the darkness. In other words condemnation is the state of your being when you are outside a relationship with God. It is your choice, not something that God chooses. So light in John's gospel is symbolic of being in relationship with God and darkness is being out of that relationship. Is John trying to work out for himself and for his readers why some people believe and some don't? We have to be very careful not to use this gospel as a condemnation of those who don't believe. That is what we do when we stop

reading this passage at v 16 because we don't take time to understand what it means here to be condemned. It is not choose now or forget about it. It is in moments of crisis in our lives that we choose to enter into relationship with God or muddle through on our own. When we choose to be in a life sustaining relationship with God we find ourselves in the light. And making the choice one time doesn't seal the deal so to speak. Not the deal of salvation but the deal of relationship. God loves us unconditionally AND wants us to be in relationship with him. but when we stray, God still loves us, even when we don't love him, when we are in the darkness.

So what difference does this mean for us? As individuals and as a church? What does God have in mind for you and for us? I think there is a really interesting insight in this for us.

Last Tuesday I gave the message at a Lenten program at St. Michaels Catholic church in Glen Allen. It was an amazing

experience to be a woman and a priest offering words from the pulpit of a Catholic church. That symbol was way more significant than anything that I said. The message of the universality of the light of Christ for all people was delivered not in what I said but in the symbolic message of my presence of the unconditional love that God has for all of us.

We need to believe the Good News that in Jesus is the world's salvation, and not condemnation. Can we accept this? Beyond this simplicity, John is telling a greater story. The story that goes beyond just believing. It is about trusting. By trusting Jesus and the truth of the cross, our lives become transformed. By putting our trust in Jesus we choose to walk in the light. Our first loyalty must be to God. When we trust Jesus we accept the fact that the new life he offers us is not something we earn. There is no ecclesiastical score card that God has to measure how much we are loved. We need to serve God for the sake of

serving God and not for the hope of reward. Trusting Jesus doesn't guarantee that we will be happy, that we will be rich, or that we will be immune to being tempted by the darkness. The gift that we receive by trusting Jesus is a gift far more valuable. It is the gift of eternal life.