



The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist

Post Office Box 441 / 507 Federal Street
Milton, Delaware 19968



www.saintjohnsmilton.org

The Rev. Thomas M. White

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

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Please pray with me: Ever-loving and present God, your Son came not to condemn the world but to redeem it. We rejoice to be reborn in the baptismal waters by your Spirit and to live in the wonder of your unending and abounding grace; through Christ Jesus the Lord. Amen.

Imagine being on the proverbial deserted island, alone, with no books, no Bible, and trying to remember all you can from the Scriptures to help sustain you, comfort you, and bring you peace and hope as you pray for and await rescue. Surely we would speak the familiar and beloved verses of the 23rd Psalm and the Lord's Prayer. But there is one other key verse that we would surely utter many times from memory: 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." This single verse has been called "the Gospel in a nutshell."

But, have these words become so familiar to us that we no longer give them even casual thought? And so, I invite you to ponder with me for the next few minutes the transforming power of this verse, probably the best-known in all of Scripture.

"For God so loved..." What is your image of God? What is God like? Is God an angry and wrathful judge? Does God curse and condemn us for our sins? Is God the source of suffering in the world? The answers come in four simple words: "for God so loved." God's core, God's heart, God's essence, God's nature, God's intention, God's work is love!

The Apostle Paul experienced this incredible, overflowing and seeking love of God. How, Paul most surely must have asked, could God in Christ have forgiven him for all the zealous persecutions Paul had inflicted on Jesus' followers? How could God accept him when he had sought to murder the disciples of Christ? Paul, you will remember, held the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen, the first disciple martyred because he proclaimed Christ as Savior and Lord. Paul came to know it was only because God's nature is love and in this love God forgives even the worst of sinners. Yet God gives each of us the freedom to not love God in return, to utterly reject this love. Yet, God does not reject us, does not give up on us, but keeps pursuing us, by every means, to save us.

"For God so loved the world..." All of God's love is directed toward the world. This is beyond our imagining when we consider how far the world has moved away from God. But, despite the world's sin and unbelief, its wars, all the maiming and killing, the despots, the injustice, the sufferings, God refuses to give up on it, or on us. And, praise God, around the world there are two billion people whose Master is Jesus, we numbered among them, who seek fervently and tirelessly to redeem God's world in the power of God's love.

John 3:16 then goes on to provide the indisputable evidence of God's love: "God gave his only Son." The cross of Jesus testifies to the infinite height and depth, the boundless length and breadth of God's love, impossible to measure.

Recently a member of St. John's and I were discussing that horrible story in the book of Genesis about Abraham who was ready and willing, at God's command, to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Despite the fact that Abraham and Sarah were far, far beyond the age of being able to have a child, God had richly blessed them with Isaac. But then, in a test of Abraham's faith, God directed Abraham to give Isaac up, Abraham's heir, to sacrifice Isaac, together with all of Abraham's dreams and hopes. Abraham and Isaac are walking to the place where the sacrifice is to occur. Isaac, only a boy, is carrying the wood upon which he, not knowing, is to be sacrificed. And Isaac asks his father the question that must have pierced Abraham's heart: "Father, I see the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering to God?" Abraham, tears surely streaming down his cheeks, answers, "God will provide the lamb, my son." And we know that at the last moment God intervened, "Abraham, do not do anything to the boy." But centuries later, God did provide the Lamb of sacrifice, God's only Son, the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world, yours and mine. God doesn't send Jesus simply to deliver a message: "God loves you." No, God sends his beloved Son to die, on a cross, for you, for me, for the life of the world. I ask you, how is it humanly possible to measure and comprehend a love such as this?

Imagine for a moment what it would be like for someone to die for you? Someone pushes you out of the path of an oncoming car and dies in the process, in your stead. It would be difficult to fully grasp the gratitude that would fill our mind, heart, and soul. Jesus Christ, though, has done just that! And the entire Christian life, all we say, all we do to glorify Jesus and live out his love become expressions of our gratitude to God.

"That everyone who believes in him, should not perish..." As we are filled with faith by the Holy Spirit, for St. Paul teaches faith is God's work within us, death has no ultimate power or final hold over us, nor our loved ones who have died in the faith. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he says this: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith---and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."

And then the crescendo of John 3:16: "but may have eternal life." Notice the verb tense here, not "will have" but "have eternal life." Life eternal doesn't begin after we die, it begins here and now in the believer's heart and soul and life. Of course, the resurrected life will be fully realized and brought to perfection in the moment of our death, but eternal life gives joy and hope to our lives right now. Everlasting life began in the moment we were baptized, the moment we were reborn by water and the Holy Spirit, the moment when God called us by name and declared "you are mine today and forever, the moment when God became our Papa and Christ our brother. Holy Baptism marked the beginning of eternal life with God, a life that continues with God, in a flowing, seamless manner, into the everlasting life that follows our death and, by God's faithfulness and power, our resurrection.

In this beloved verse, the Gospel within the Gospel, we find the crux of Christian faith and life. Why Christmas? The answer is simple: John 3:16! What are Lent, Holy Week, and Good Friday all about? John 3:16! What is Easter's message and promise? John 3:16. Why Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church? John 3:16! Why the Feast Days of St. John, St. Matthew, St. Mary Magdalene, Saints Peter and Paul, Mary, Mother of our Lord, St. Patrick's Day, and the Day of All Saints and the martyrs? John 3:16! Why do we come together every Lord's Day to be with each other and to worship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the community of faith? John 3:16! We don't need to wait until we are on that deserted island to experience the power of John 3:16 to bring us comfort when we hurt, to give us the will to not give up when we are beset by challenge, to fill us with hope when we fear we can't face another day, to assure us God is present when we feel so alone. Whatever life throws our way, we can endure it in the strength of 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 by may have eternal life!" Let us with one voice say, Thanks be to God!

† In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.