

“Greater Love”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, March 11, 2018

John 2, Ephesians 2, Numbers 21

British Victorian composer Sir John Stainer composed his major choral work, ‘Crucifixion’ in 1887. And it’s centrepiece, like a jewel, was the setting of ‘God so Loved the World. In the 1900’s, it was the mainstay of many choirs for a Lenten anthem. And because I sang it in church choirs for many years, the words of John 3:16 are set indelibly in my heart.

“ God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whomso believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

And this verse is also recognized for it’s numbers: 3:16, thanks to a man whose name wasn’t John but rather ‘Rainbow Man’, who wore a rainbow coloured wig and held up a sign that said 3:16 on it, and whose real name was Rollin Frederick Stewart.

From Wikipedia, I learned that Stewart became a born-again Christian who was determined to "get the message out" via television. His first major appearance was at the 1977 NBA Finals; by the time of the 1979 Major League Baseball All-Star Game, broadcasters actively tried to avoid showing him.

Stewart was arrested in 1992 after a standoff in a California hotel. During the standoff, he threatened to shoot at airplanes taking off from nearby Los Angeles International Airport, and covered the hotel room windows with "John 3:16" placards.

Stewart is currently serving three consecutive life sentences in prison on kidnapping charges. So much for the religious guy holding the sign.

And then there is Tim Tebow, the Heisman-winning quarterback for the Denver Broncos. He painted 3:16 in black paint under his eye before his games.

In a game on January 8, 2012, which would become known as "The 3:16 game", Tebow threw for 316 yards in a playoff upset against the Pittsburgh Steelers; a game in which measurements of 3, 16 and 31.6 were also noted.

So you can see the challenge of thinking new thoughts about John 3:16, a verse that has been so pedestrianized by our culture.

The Old Testament passage finds Moses forming a bronze image of a snake to place on a pole. The people have been terrorized by snakes invading their camp and many are dying from snake bites.

God told Moses to form a serpent of bronze and place it on the pole, and when someone has been bitten have them look upon the serpent on the pole and they will live.

Our passage from John is part of the conversation that he was having with Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, who has come to him in the darkness of night to sit with him and ask him questions. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? How can these things be?”

And in his answering the questions, at one point, Jesus reaches way back in his scriptural knowledge to bring up the story of Moses. “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so much the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Jesus refers to this serpent being lifted up and that in like manner, the Son of Man will be lifted up, foreshadowing his crucifixion. The term translated “lift up” (hypsōo) can also mean “exalt,” and John uses that double meaning to communicate a theological paradox.

It points to both the physical lifting of Jesus into the air on a cross, and the lifting up in exaltation of Jesus by God.

And yes, while the Son of Man died a horrible death upon a cross, which is the very last place you would think God would be working, in his death and in his resurrection from his death, Jesus is exalted.

In Numbers 21, we read: “Look at the serpent and live.” In John 3, we read, “Believe in the Son of Man and live eternally.” But in John, ‘believe’ is always an action verb. It is something you do, and it is more than a ‘yes’.

Neutrality and indecisiveness are not an option. To follow Jesus requires the courage to go against the traffic and the global spin of brutal and condemning ways.

God didn’t send his Son into the world to only have us say ‘yes’ in order to secure eternal life. God sent his Son into the world to ask us to faithfully continue to seek the good, root out the evil, expose the dark, embrace the light.

God sent us God’s son so that we might know what the Kingdom of God looks like, in Jesus, so that we might know what it is we are striving towards, to reorder, to remember, to restore this broken world of ours.

From Workingpreacher.org, I offer these words, “To change the world or save it requires a process that ends hate, injustice, oppression and replaces it with justice, compassion, mercy, love, equality.”

Jesus said, “And this is the judgement, 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.”

These words tell us that some will choose hate over light, evil deeds over good deeds, and therefore will reject the light of the son of God. Others, however will agree with Jesus' quest to change or restore the world to its original intent from a world full of injustice to a loving, just and caring world.

For John, believing in Jesus has more to do with what people believe and do regarding evil, hate, exploitation, and injustice rather than saying a simple 'Yes' to 3:16.

And so, how do we do this work? Paul, in his Letter to the Ephesians speaks of grace. "For by grace you have been saved through faith." There by the grace of God I go, we will say when we step into the unknown.

There by the grace of God I go is echoed in John Newton's words, "Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; 'tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

God so loved the world not in just one instance two thousand years ago when he gave his son, who died on a cross, that we might live. But God's love continues to manifest itself throughout creation, through gifts of grace that flow through you and me.

We've been here 10,000 years a couple of times over now. And this entity that we call 'grace' has never ceased to save us, and mystify us. This grace, so freely bestowed upon us, comes from this greater love, which we know only in part.

And until such time as we meet our Maker, this grace, like a gossamer thread, connects us to that source of Love that has no end.

Thanks be to God. Amen.