**John 3:14-21 March 14, 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from the Gospel of John the 3rd chapter here re-reading these words. “For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Last week we had the opportunity to hear the most recognizable portion of Scripture when it comes to understanding the Law. We heard the story of how God gave Moses the 10 commandments on Mt. Sinai. The giving of the 10 commandments fits into the season of Lent very well. Just this last Wednesday in the Service of Prayer and Preaching we spoke the 10 Commandments. We remember them. The confirmands are currently going through lessons that touch on all of the 10 Commandments and expound on them how it isn’t just, “You shall not kill” it’s “You shouldn’t hurt or harm your neighbor, and you should help and support them in every physical need.” The giving of the 10 Commandments is a reminder of God’s commands to abstain from forms of evil which will show us our sin and turn us to repentance focusing us on Jesus Christ. These are core themes of the season of Lent. So it seems a bit puzzling, that here in our Gospel lesson for today we look at the other side of the coin and are greeted with Christ’s Words from John 3:16. If the 10 commandments are the most recognizable portion of Scripture when it comes to the Law, than in contrast John 3:16 is the most recognizable portion of Scripture when it comes to Gospel. But really, John 3:16 is more than that. It is the most recognizable portion of Scripture period. It is the verse that is taught to children from the very beginning of their instruction in the faith. It is the mainstream Christian verse, the go-to for any and all Christianity for marketing on any and all products. Just walk into a Christian bookstore and count how many times you find this verse on mugs, plates, movies, books, and key chains and I’m sure it will be well into the double digits. John 3:16 may have gone “mainstream” but don’t let that take away from its message. John 3:16 is the Gospel in a nutshell, a summarized telling of all that God has done for us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Paul reminds us of God’s love, the central theme of John 3:16, in our Epistle lesson saying: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved.”

Love. That’s the teaching moment from John 3:16. That’s the message of this famous verse. But I ask again, what is it doing here? Shouldn’t this verse be saved for the joy of Easter morning? When we can start saying that A-word again that has been omitted during Lent and singing portions of the liturgy that are excluded? What is the most famous Gospel verse in the Bible doing here over halfway through this season of repentance and sorrow over sin?

The answer lies in the Old Testament lesson for today, for there we don’t find such a happy scene. The people had rebelled again against God, They had become impatient and grumbled, speaking against God and God’s representative Moses. And so, in order to turn them from their sin and turn them back to himself God sends fiery serpents upon the Israelites. These serpents go through the camp infecting the people and many died. While the people are in peril and danger God tells Moses to “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” This was the sign and the evidence of God’s love and providing hand. The serpent on the pole was the salvation of the people. When they looked at it they would be reminded of God’s love for them and how He provides for their needs and they would be healed.

The scene of the serpents, the literal representation of sin as we know from Satan taking the form of a serpent in the Garden of Eden is a scene that seems to fit into the season of Lent. Here we see God leading the people to repentance through the most drastic of measures. Here we find rebellion and impatience and as the Law functions in our lives as sinners, we see ourselves reflected in the sins of the Israelites. Because we get impatient and rebellious with God. We still remain sinners, who sin against each other. Who sin against God and against our own bodies. Who get impatient with those around us and begin complaining and grumbling about all of the things we don’t have, rather than the abundance that God has provided of the things we truly need. We are infected with sin, in the same way that a serpent’s venom corrupts and destroys a person from the inside once they’ve been bitten. How corrupt have we become? Well, Paul says it best when he describes us as “dead in our trespasses and sins”. Dead people can’t provide anything, they can’t take care of their own needs or wants, they can simply lie there, dead. And in regards to our salvation that’s where we are. Dead. Unable to fulfill any section of those 10 commandments we heard about last week. Not even one part! Not even one commandment! We are dead. Dead to sin, unable to revive ourselves. Dead just like the Israelites all would have perished if not for the snake on the pole. The snake that we know, from our Gospel lesson, that wasn’t just a random occurrence without any meaning, but a foreshadowing of what Christ would do for the entire world.

John 3:16 is the famous verse, but the verses before and after John 3:16 are just as important. For in them we see the entire context of what Jesus is saying and how this is a lesson in the Law and the Gospel. For as John says earlier. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” There’s the harsh reality of sin and our nature as dead in our trespasses. There’s the dark cloud over the joy of this monumental verse. The refocusing of Christ’s mission and why he came, which was to die. It reminds me of the scene from C.S. Lewis’s famous work “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.” If you’re not familiar with the story, C.S. Lewis used a fantasy story about children finding a mystical land of Narnia, to illustrate key themes of Christianity. In one scene the white witch, who represents Satan makes a deal with Aslan the Lion who represents God, for the lives of the children. And as the white witch leaves everyone rejoices and cheers for the lives of the children have been spared. The other soldiers of Narnia start to celebrate, but Aslan just slowly walks away. For later that night Aslan is killed by the white witch. The deal is revealed to the reader that Aslan traded his life for the lives of the children.

In the same way, while we hear the Gospel message of John 3:16 and rejoice that eternal life is ours, Lent is a reminder of what John 3:14 states. That the Son of Man *must* be lifted up. And that our joy over salvation must come, from the tears and the gut wrenching sorrow, of knowing that Jesus Christ gave up his life, for us. That we, who were impatient, and rebellious, and so far into sin that we were dead to our sin and completely incapable of fulfilling the requirements of the Law on our own, were saved only because of His sacrifice and the shedding of His blood. We deserve that pain, and that death and crucifixion, for we are the trespassers and the sinners and the rebellious creation of God. Yet he dies, and we live.

“For God so *loved* the world, that he gave his only Son”. That’s the teaching moment of this famous verse. Love. Love that led God almighty, the creator of the entire universe, to send His only begotten Son to die for you. And his love is so great that packed into this verse we can see and understand that he didn’t just die for you, or for me, or for everyone here, or even everyone living in the world today, but he died for all people of all time. God’s love extended to the entire world, and that’s what Jesus Christ died for. His love was so great that it included everyone, so that if eternal life is to be ours and we wish to overcome death all we have to do is believe with the faith that God himself creates in our hearts. That is the cause for celebration. God’s love is the reason that we sing, and cheer, and rejoice now and always for we are God’s redeemed children, at one time dead and now alive, through the work of His Son.

We as Lutherans know this because we base our faith, and our lives not just on one section of Scripture, but Scripture as a whole. We use Scripture to interpret Scripture, which leads us to see that all Scripture is pointing to Christ. Scripture is our beacon, it is our light to understanding this world and our own lives as Christians. Christ is revealed to us in all sections of Scripture, as we see the serpent lifted up on the pole, as Christ was lifted up on the cross. As we see Paul’s words here in Ephesians 2 as reinforcing what Jesus said in John 3 by saying “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast.” The point being that grace is the foundation of our salvation. Grace, God’s undeserved love shown to us through the giving of His Son over to death so that the payment would be made on our behalf, and we would live eternally with him.

I pray, this day and always, that as we all continue to read well known sections of Scripture and study God’s Word that we would grow in the knowledge of the truth together as Brothers and Sisters in Christ. That we would grow in the knowledge of our sinfulness and our need for a Savior. That we would see our true nature as dead in our trespasses and sins when it comes to the works of our hands and everything that we do. And that we would see Christ in the Old Testament and New Testament, pointing to the cross of salvation where he died so that we would live. John 3:16 isn’t out of place for Lent, because in this verse we are again focused on the cross. The cross of glory, where God gave His Son for us. May God bless you now and always as you grow in your faith, grow in this life in wisdom and knowledge and as Paul says as we walk in the doing of good works which God has prepared for us to do. May you continue to be His servant in all that you do. And never forget the promise of the Gospel, as Christ himself said, “For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him, should not perish, but have eternal life.”

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.