

March 11, 2018 Lent 4

GOSPEL

John 3:14–21

To explain the salvation of God to the religious leader, Nicodemus, Jesus refers to the scripture passage quoted in today's first reading. Just as those who looked upon the bronze serpent were healed, so people will be saved when they behold Christ lifted up on the cross.

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶For 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.

¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those 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. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But 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."

So, we lost an hour of sleep last night. I always hate that, except it is cushioned by the fact that it means spring and summer are next up in our seasons. Even though I know I am going to lose that hour of sleep, it doesn't make me go to bed any earlier. I am a night owl. And many of you know that I am not an early bird, I don't care about worm so I don't care if all the early birds get them. It would be great to me to have our Sunday service at 8 and 10:30 PM – that would be ideal. I do not like early mornings. This is a true story, ...about a week and a half ago, I was getting up for like the third day in a row before 7 AM, which I try to make a very unusual thing in my life, when I started to get in the shower and I realized that the shower walls were all wet. For a second, I was perplexed – how could the shower walls be all wet already – Karen and Theo were still sleeping. And then it dawned me, they were wet because, I had just got out of the shower already – I had already taken it! Have you ever been in the shower forgot whether you shampooed your hair or not?

Sometimes in life we go on auto pilot; have you ever had a time when you did something and didn't realize you were doing it? How many times have I driven home only to be thinking about something and realize I've driven the whole way home and I don't remember anything about the roads or traffic or anything else. I'm guessing that has happened to all of us who drive when things weigh heavy on our mind.

The presiding bishop of our church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, wrote about this exact thing in the Lutheran magazine during the Advent season. She talked about how easy it was to get caught up in other things in life that grab our attention away from what we are to be about. In the article, she wrote about how her spiritual director told her to focus back in the present with just one phrase: "Just This -Just now."

How easy in life it is to take things for granted, and lose focus? This just doesn't happen when heavy things are weighing on our mind. It happens in our everyday life. It can be as simple as taking a shower. We take what is in front of us so easily for granted as we look past them to other things.

For example, after service today take a look at the lunch you will have later. Look at carefully what is in front of you. Think of all the different places in the world the ingredients came from for the food on your plate just for this one meal, the one you are eating. It is amazing when you think about it. Maybe the wheat in the bread was grown in Kansas, maybe some spice came from Europe, maybe the coffee beans are from South America. Maybe the milk from Indiana. Maybe the fish from Alaska. And the list goes on and on. What about the plate you are eating off of – where was it manufactured; or the utensils, where were they made and in order to make them, where did the metal or plastic come from?

When you leave here today most of you were going to get into an automobile that contains many separate parts, made in different places all around the world, and that all come together to form what takes you from one place to another, with gasoline that comes from yet another country.

In 2018, what we are able to have before is simply a marvel and I think it is so too easy to slip into autopilot in our lives, assume its presence, and take it all for granted.

Here are two verses from today's Gospel text: "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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

I think it is also too easy, as Christians, to also take these verses for granted. “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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” For many of us, we have heard them all our lives, especially verse 16. Is it possible that we go on autopilot in our faith life? We look pass these two great verses of scripture and we take it for granted, we let it slip in the background of our lives, and we go on autopilot focusing on other matters we deem more important. Not only can we fall into the trap of taking it for granted, but we actually, in a lot of cases, make things harder. We take something as simple as this God’s love in the world, that Jesus came to save it, and not condemn it, and yet somehow find ways to make it harder. We somehow find ways to make it more difficult; we somehow find ways to make it so that we don’t even notice it sometimes, we somehow find ways to turn grace into law. This is not just true for us as individual Christians, it is true for the Church as well.

In my extended family, I have a relative that wanted to join a church and the church told her she couldn’t join as long as she was a bartender! Some denominations get so caught up in the words and phrases of “No,” “Can’t” and “Do Not,” that they lose focus on God’s grace and instead see themselves as God’s police enforcers.

We are guilty in the Lutheran Church as well. There is not one Lutheran church denomination, there a few, and we fractured over issues of who can love who, and who is able to come to communion, or who is able to pray with one another. We even do it in subtle ways, in our same denominations and congregations, creating so many rules or guidelines in

the church when it comes to practicing our faith that we create another set of potential structures from remembering: “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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Geez, you name it and pretty soon it becomes the rule for worshiping this gracious God. For instance, we can't say a certain “A” word during the season of Lent, or we can't have candles here, or flowers here; we can't sing this hymn during this month or have this color displayed. Not that these things and practices aren't helpful guides and they don't have something to teach us – for they certainly do. However, are we guilty of becoming like the Pharisees and turning it into a bunch of rules, spoken and unspoken, that tend to make people confused, feel more like an outsider, or excluded from coming to worship a gracious and loving God.

It is so easy to make things harder in our faith; it is so easy to go on auto pilot concerning our faith; that we pull it out when a crisis hits, but otherwise, mainly give thanks that I have my independence to do what I want, when I want to do it.

The church season of Lent is designed to take our life off of autopilot and re-center it once again on our saving God. It is designed to remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. It is designed to take us to Good Friday, but not stop there, but take us to the cave of the missing body on Easter Sunday. Why? 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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Amen.