

Sunday March 11th, 2018
Lent IV

PRAYER: Giver of light, we come here today seeking the way out of darkness. O Healer of the blind let us feel the touch of your clay upon our eyes. Then we, too, shall bathe in Siloam's water. We shall wash and return seeing, our sight restored. Your light shall burn within us, O God, and our neighbours shall behold the light of the world. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: The apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:6, "He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." May we offer our tithes and offering now in a bountiful way so we may by God's grace reap a bountiful harvest for his glory?

PASTORAL PRAYER: Dear God, we come before you today, a fearful and confused people. Many shadows haunt this world and cast their darkness upon us and those we love. Anxiety crashes into our hearts as we hear of nation lifting up swords against nation. Our hopes are crushed when we hear of governments that talk of pursuing peace at powerful summits, but at the same time continue to develop weapons. We hear of articulate people extolling the virtues of tolerance, but soon they point to differences between people as an excuse for exclusion and oppression. O God, if we had to depend on ourselves for strength, we would be left with only despair for the future. If we had to rely on the light within us for illumination, we would have to reconcile ourselves to perpetual darkness. But thanks be to you, O God, for in you we can embrace a future with hope. You have enlightened us with your light, given not only for us but for all people who inhabit the earth. We thank you for granting us deliverance from our fear and clarity for our confusion.

At our baptism we took a vow to walk your way. We promised to follow you in our quest for the truth and to reflect your light. At that time, we were so confident of your love for us that we never doubted we would remain loyal to you. But our allegiance to you has wavered. We have strayed from your way to pursue more exotic paths. We have neglected your truth to chase the less demanding wisdom of the world. We have shunned the light to reap the rewards of dealers of darkness. But we have not gotten off scot-free.

We have sown seeds of fruitless efforts, and now we are reaping empty promises and dashed hopes. The exotic paths that offered endless variety, have only served to aggravate our insecurity and anxiety.

The truths of the world's wisdom have kept us preoccupied, and we are left disappointed with fruit of our labours. We have pursued earth's rewards, only to discover that they have corrupted us before moth and rust could corrupt them.

Yet we still come to you, dear God, in full confidence that you will greet us not only as our judge but as our friend. So, we ask you for wisdom greater than our wisdom, for vision greater than our vision and strength beyond our strength. Befriend us anew today, that our enemies may no longer have dominion over us; and that we, by our style of life and integrity of witness, may win friends for you and the gospel.

Help us dear Lord not to be blind to those around us who need your grace. Grant us hearts large enough to embrace our sisters and brothers who face uncertain days ahead because of failing health. (Jim Cookson) Wrap your loving arms around all our senior friends who are finding this winter a rough and isolating time. We call on your direction to help us be supportive of our brothers and sister who are anxiously awaiting decisions and approvals from immigration authorities, so that their loved ones can be reunited with them. Speed we pray the bureaucracy and proved by your generous Spirit the money needed for plane tickets and other necessities.

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Call us now, O God, to yourself as we meditate on your word and as we gather around your table. Help us to set aside those things that alienate us from you and from each other. As we break open your word and break the bread, break we pray our hard hearts and call us to a life of imitating Jesus. This we pray in his precious name. Amen.

BENEDICTION: As the Lord sent Jesus into the world to manifest the grace of God, the Lord sends us into the world to manifest the love of Christ. God now in the assurance that, as the Lord stood with Jesus in the hour of his trial, the Lord shall stand with us in the hour of our trial. As the Lord went with him, the Lord shall go with us.

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John 3:14-21

“No Condemnation I Dread”

One of the strategies politicians, and advertisers, use to capture your attention, and to be remembered often by the public, is with slogans. The goal is to bring to mind ideas, persons, or products every time the slogan is repeated. It works extremely well, if the slogan catches on. For example: what comes to mind when I say the slogan “Make America Great”. Despite how we feel about the US president, we think of him when we hear that slogan.

Closer to home. How about “sunny ways”? Doesn’t really roll off the tongue, but that was used by our Prime Minister in the last election. If I were to say the slogan, “Always Fresh”, you would know I am referring to...Tim Hortons. How about a growling tiger shouting, “They’re Great!” Frosted Flakes of course, hocked by Tony the Tiger. “Their Magically Delicious”, is of course, Lucky Charms.

Slogans are a great advertising tool unless they are poorly thought out. I found some on the web that were not well thought out. Nina’s photography in the States has the slogan on its van, “We shoot people and pets”. Creston Valley Meats’ slogan is “these animals are just dying for you to taste them”. A martial arts program in the states advertised by saying, “we build better kids one punch at a time”. Then there is the Chicago Homicide department whose motto is, “Our day starts when yours ends”. Really? How in the world did that one gets through editing?

I end this little tour of sloganeering with one of the worst I have ever seen, coming from Electrolux Vacuum cleaners that reads, “Nothing sucks like an Electrolux.” I did a little digging and found a website called “Digital Synopsis” and they had a wonderful piece by Nashville Graphic designer Cliff Dickson, who wanted to bring truth back to advertising. To accomplish this, he rewrote the advertising slogans of some well-known brands to seem more truthful.

Here is just a taste of his creativity. “Hallmark-when you care enough to give a card mass produced by a corporation.” Old Spice-smell like grandpa”. “Monopoly-a great way to ruin friendships.” “Urban Outfitters-pay money to look homeless”. “Gillette-we just keep adding blades.” “Maybelline-maybe it’s photoshop”. And my personal favourite given my dear friend Rev. Blake Eady’s love of a certain beverage. “Pepsi-when there is no coke”.

And this leads us right to the heart of the matter for today, that the Christian church is not above sloganeering; sometimes putting cute little sayings on their sign boards, in the hope that it will peak someone’s interest, and draw them into a service, or at least get people talking. But there is one Christian slogan that seems to have persisted for a long time that is based actually on a misquote of scripture.

In common Christian vocabulary, we often hear the phrase “born again”, as in a “born again Christian.” It is often used as a way to distinguish out evangelical Christians from other Christian groups, with the clear intentional claim of a spiritual superiority over other believers. Many of us have been asked at least once, “Are you born again”? “When were you born again”? If you are anything like me, you understand the question, but it still unsettles us. You know you should know when you were “born again” but often we struggle to identify a date.

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The problem is that the “born again” slogan is actually a misquote of John 3:3. I was pleased to note that the bibles in our pews (the NRSV) actually quotes the verse correctly. The verse should read, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above”. Do you see the difference? Raymond Brown, noted biblical scholar of the gospel of John, cautions preachers to be very careful with John, and especially this 3rd chapter.

Brown writes that John is very different from the other three gospels, and one of the more significant differences is that John is the only gospel record, which stresses repeatedly that Jesus came from above. In John 1 we read, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” In the gospel of John, Jesus’ origin is heaven, or in the very presence of God. Our redemption comes because Jesus came down to us, so that we too might be born from above.

So, it is not at all whether we are “born again”, but rather we must be “born from above” or born anew. I want us to understand this, because many Christians tie the idea of being “born again” to another very famous Christian slogan that appears in this same chapter. A verse many of us have memorized and can quote quite easily. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life”.

Many well-meaning Christians believe that this one verse is a kind of a summary of the salvation story. So, they try to find ingenious ways to advertise this point. At big sporting events we often see someone holding up large placards that read John 3:16. Tim Tebow is famous for having 3:16 printed on his black eye strips in football games. Wrestler, Cold Stone Steve Austen even uses it to promote himself as Austen 3:16. I find that one particularly disturbing.

Now remember what I just said about the phrase “born again”, because John 3:16 is also often misunderstood, and it comes down to how we understand one simple word; “so”. The very first word of this verse in Greek is “*outos*”. As we read this morning, the vast majority of biblical translators begin 3:16 with the words, “God so loved the world”. The problem is that in our English usage we understand the word “so” in this verse incorrectly.

We most often understand the word in terms of degree or amount. Like I love ice cream “so much”, or “God loves the world a LOT”. However, that is not the way John meant it. The word “so” in English can also be used in the sense of “in this way” or “in this manner”. From the Greek original, this verse should be understood as “God loved the world in this way” or “God loved in this manner”. The writer of John is talking about the way God loved the world, not how much he loved the world. This is very important given the context of this passage.

Believers are often quick to pull John 3:16 out of context, but John had this verse in a context; a very significant context. Verse 16 is intended to draw us back to verse 14. God loved the world in this way, by lifting up Jesus in the same manner as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. This is, of course, according to John’s theology of Jesus coming from above. So, what has Moses to do with any of this. Check out Numbers 21.

In this passage, the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. After about a year of hiking around, they began to complain. They didn’t like the food, water was sparse, it was hot, dusty and dry. Many wanted to return to Egypt, even if it meant slavery.

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In one of the classic biblical moments, God responds to the grumbling of the people, by sending in poisonous serpents. Carl Cross writes it is kind of like healing a broken arm by smashing your toe with a hammer. Your arm is still broken, but you're too busy screaming about your toe to even care. The poisonous snake bites were to give the Israelites some perspective. Things could be much worse, than manna every day.

In response to the snakes, God instructed Moses to craft a bronze image of the snakes and set it up on a pole. If anyone was bitten by a snake, they could survive the poison by simply looking at the snake on the pole. So, just as the moment the snake was lifted up the Israelites could live, John tells us that the moment Jesus was lifted up on the cross, anyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Do you get it now? How John 3:16 shouldn't be taken out of context.

But there is one other very significant element to this story that demands reflection. That bronze serpent shows up again in the scriptures. It appears in 2 Kings 18, which records the reign of King Hezekiah. Hezekiah was an honoured king because the bible says he, "did what was right in the sight of God". In verse 4 we read that Hezekiah "removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole".

These are all things connected to idol worship, and Hezekiah would have none of it. But read the rest of verse 4 and it says, "Hezekiah broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses made, for until those days, the people of Israel had made offerings to it." It would seem that the serpent Moses lifted up, or at least a facsimile of it, was kept in the temple as a religious relic. Over time, people began to treat the serpent as an idol.

Just like the Israelites in Moses' time could look upon the serpent and live, many Judeans in Hezekiah's day, believed that by worshipping the serpent, they could be healed of all manner of ailments. The relic originally meant to draw the Israelites to worship God, had ironically now become itself the object of worship. The bronze serpent had become an end in itself. The serpent symbol had morphed from a symbol pointing to God to a simplistic formula.

If you want healing, all you need do is pray and sacrifice to the idol, but what they should have done was prayed to God. Now here is the main point I wish to make today, when we think of slogans, especially in this context, religious slogans. It is important to remember that God can never, and I mean never ever, be reduced to simple formulas. This is very important given this passage from John, and how it is often used. God is not a gimmick. John 3:16, in and of itself, is an insufficient guide for healing and salvation.

Throughout the history of God's people, there have developed slogans and rituals that people believed were short cuts to God and his forgiveness. In Jeremiah 7:4 we read of one such attempt. "Do not trust these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'" What Jeremiah is talking about is the custom the people had of doing sinful things, and then believing all they had to do to be right with God, is enter the temple and say "this is the temple of the Lord", three times and everything is okay.

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This beloved verse John 3:16, is also a dangerous one for us spiritually. It immediately draws us to focus exclusively on Jesus' death to the exclusion of patterning our lives after Jesus. It is not enough to visit a sanctuary, and pay homage to a relic, like a cross on the wall, and believe we are living an authentic Christian life. As Paul Tillich, describes, an idol is anything that usurps God. Anything that keeps us from relating and engaging in the presence of God.

It is never enough to admire Jesus death on the cross, while ignoring his call, to "take up our cross and follow me". As I mentioned before, some Christians believe that John 3:16 is the Gospel in a nutshell, but it is not, no matter how many people respond positively to the signs held up at a football game. It is not enough to be "born again", as we must be "born from above". That is, radically changed and repurposed.

It is interesting that as John 3:16 has been called the gospel summary, Micah 6:8 has been referred to as the summary of the prophets, but I have never seen it on a placard.

This powerful verse reads, "God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does God require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" And why not actually focus on Jesus own summary that all the law and prophets hang on two commandments, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" and to "love your neighbour as yourself". (Mark 12:28-31)

The Christian life is not about sloganeering, despite our best intentions. It is about making disciples. Calling people to a deep abiding relationship with God in Christ. It is not about being "born again" or even about being "born from above" but it is about living in the light, that Jesus brought from above and invites us to live in each and every day of eternity. As St. Francis of Assisi said so well, "We preach the Gospel all day long-and if necessary, we use words!"

Tony Campolo tells a story of a mission program in the slums of Philadelphia, to which homeless men came regularly for a free meal and a place to sleep. All that was expected of the men, in return, was that they would sit through a sermon. (not really a free meal, now is it) One evening, the youth group from our church was invited to lead the evening service and the group voted for me to do the preaching.

As a young 18-year-old kid, I stood in the pulpit and gave these men a forceful message that had all the markings of a "hellfire and brimstone" tirade. I preached against sin and told the men that they were hell bound if they didn't heed my message and come down the aisle and surrender their lives for conversion.

One of the things about people who have lost everything, including their pride, is that they do not hesitate to say what they really think. Having nothing to lose, they can be right up front about what they are thinking. One of the men shouted out, in the midst of my sermon, "Are you talking about the same God that we heard about last week when an old man was here preaching to us?"

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He told us that God was full of love and wanted to help us in spite of all that we may have done, and that God loved us no matter what kind of people we were.

It doesn't sound like you are talking about the same God. Your God is angry and condemning. Are you talking about the same God we heard about last week?" Campolo writes, "I was taken aback and embarrassed by the man's question. At that point, I remembered that Jesus had come into the world, not to condemn the world, but to reveal God's love.

(Stories that feed Your Soul, p. 72)

When we rely on religious slogans as the guidance of our faith, and the source of our outreach, we become narrow, dogmatic, and dangerous. We end up inviting people to relate to a relic, or a phrase, instead of relating to God, and I mean the full picture of God; at least as full as we can perceive and know.

Jesus is the light, who has been raised up to draw all people into the light. Faith means being drawn to the light and desiring to walk in the light, and by shunning the darkness. "For God loved the world in this way, that he sent Jesus down from above, and to be lifted up on the cross as a light drawing all people to himself. And those who willingly come to the light in Christ, are saved from the darkness and are eternally secured in God's care."