

Lent 4 Sermon, Sunday March 10, 2024
St. Luke/San Lucas, Vancouver
Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3,117-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

May the words of my mouth
And the meditation of all our hearts
Be acceptable in your sight
Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer
Amen.

Please be seated.

Our gospel today includes the most well-known Bible verse in America, John 3:16. We see references to it everywhere—on billboards along highways, on signs behind home plate at baseball games, tattooed on the arms of professional athletes and pop stars.

In the 3:16 football game, quarterback Tim Tebow famously threw for 316 yards, leading the Denver Broncos past the Pittsburgh Steelers in a playoff game, which many evangelical sports fans took as evidence of God’s divine calling for the devout athlete.

And it’s not just sports fans who are fixated on this particular verse. The great theologian, Martin Luther, father of the Protestant reformation, called it “the gospel in miniature,”¹ containing the very heart of our Christian faith—God’s love for us, God’s desire for us to be saved from our own inadequacies, our own imperfections, and God’s willingness to act, to send Jesus Christ, not to condemn the world, but that the world, through Him, might be saved.

As a preschooler, I memorized this verse, in the King James version, of course. Truly, I don’t remember a time when I did not know all the words to the famous John 3:16. We recited it in Sunday School. We located it in the Bible during our regular Sword of the Lord Drills. We

¹ J. Barrington Bates. “God So Loves the World, Lent 4” 2015. www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon

examined it in Bible study and listened to multiple sermons about God's son, Jesus Christ, saving us from perishing, providing us with everlasting life if, of course, we believed.

One year at summer camp, for our bedtime exercise, we all sat on our bunkbeds in our warmest flannel jammies. Going around the circle, we were each asked to share with the group our "John 3:16" moment, that time of conversion when we first believed.

By the time I was an adult, if anyone had asked, I would have assured them that I understood John 3:16. I thought I knew it from every angle, forward and backward. Yet, one incident showed me that I really didn't understand it at all.

I've shared this with some of you, but it may be new to others. During my first assignment in the Foreign Service, I was responsible for meeting with Americans who had been arrested or detained by Mexican authorities, to explain the Mexican judicial process to them and to do my best to ensure appropriate treatment for them. One night, I received a call at home, informing me that an American had been arrested at the airport, and was being taken to the Federal Prosecutor's Office, known as Lopez 12/14. When I arrived at the building, I was escorted to the elevators. Instead of going up to the offices, we went down, into the basement levels, to the windowless interrogation rooms.

In one of the small cubicles, I found a terrified young man, seated between an interpreter and a lawyer. On the other side of the table was a federal prosecutor, who immediately began conducting the interrogation. He threatened the prisoner, and I objected. When the prisoner remained silent, he threatened him again, and I objected again. This continued for some time, until finally, the prosecutor ran out of patience and ordered me out into the hallway for a conversation. There, he told me to stop objecting and asked if I realized that, if I didn't cooperate, I could be disappeared.

At that point, I had what I sometimes call my “Oh God” moments. The ones where I know that the situation is beyond me, that I have no words, no wisdom, to respond. That the only way forward is to put myself completely in God’s hands. And so I replied that yes, I knew he had the power to disappear me, but that as long as I was able, I would keep insisting that the prisoner be treated with the dignity and respect due any human being.

For a moment there was silence, as the prosecutor stared at me. All my fear receded, to be replaced with peace, with a sense of rightness and wholeness. Regardless of what was to come, I was okay with it, because I was right where I was meant to be.

After a moment, the prosecutor spoke. *Esta completamente loca. You are completely crazy*, he said. And then he continued, *but if I’m ever in any trouble, I want someone like you on my side. And he walked away.*

I turned to re-enter the interrogation room and realized that the door behind me had been left open. The interpreter had translated the whole encounter. The young man seated at the table had tears streaming down his face. He looked at me and said, *Why did you do that? You don’t even know me, yet you were willing to stand up for me? No one had ever cared for me like that before.*

And the thought that popped into my head was, *no, you are wrong, for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. My actions are so small, my feelings and motivations so inadequate, when compared to the greatness of God’s love and God’s actions for each one of us.*

In that moment, the meaning of John 3:16 became real for me. It moved from academic, head knowledge to a lived experience. God loves us, each of us, to an extent that is beyond our understanding.

God does not want any one of us to perish, even when we have messed up, when we have hurt others and been less than perfect, God still loves us and wants us to have everlasting life. And in order to make that happen, God acted, coming down to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son, fully human and fully divine. All we have to do is to believe, truly and fully believe, in that love, and that wonderful, eternal life becomes ours.

In that moment, I caught a glimpse of God's love, a glimmer of the meaning of that familiar verse. My true John 3:16 moment.

Mary MacLeod Bethune, educator, activist, and presidential advisor who grew up as a young black woman in the Jim Crown South, had a different experience with John 3:16. She wrote: With these words (John 3:16) the scales fell from my eyes and the light came flooding in. My sense of inferiority, my fear of handicaps, dropped away. "Whosoever," it said. No Jew not Gentile, no Catholic nor Protestant, no black nor white; just "whosoever." It means that I, a humble Negro girl, had just as much chance as anybody in the sight and love of God. These words stored up a battery of faith and confidence and determination in my heart, which has not failed me to this day.²

For Mary Bethune, the words of John 3:16, the statement of God's inclusive love, gave her the assurance, the confidence, to go forward into a hostile world, to advocate for herself and for others. To become one of the most important educators, civil rights leaders, and government advisors of the twentieth century. She led voter registration drives and survived racist attacks. She fought to end racial discrimination and lynching. Appointed by President Truman, Bethune was the only woman of color at the founding conference of the United Nations in 1945. Throughout her life, her courage and confidence were grounded in the assurance of John 3:16, that God loved everyone, that God loved her.

² Callahan, Allen Dwight. In *Ture to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

We can know the words of John 3:16. We can memorize them, splash them on billboards, tattoo them on our bodies. But until we embody them, until we live them, until we allow them to energize our actions, to give us courage to show love to everyone. Until we open ourselves up to the love of God, to experience that love for ourselves and to then take that love out into the world, to allow the love of God to flow through us. Only in that moment, will these words have meaning, will they become real.

So, as we go out into the world today, let us embody these words, that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Amen.