



1616 W. Mequon Road, Mequon WI 53092
(262)241-3121 www.stjohnsmequon.org
Email: office@stjohnsmequon.org
Pastor James Tiefel
(262) 853-9723 (cell#)
Email: pastortiefel@gmail.com

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

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The Battle for Us

Jesus overcomes Satan as we believe his promises

The Gospel for today includes the most well-known of all Bible passages, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." In just a few words, Jesus reminds us that our release from sin and hell comes only from the love of God, the work of his Son, and the power of his Spirit. We rely on Jesus to protect us from Satan who desires to lead us away from our completed salvation.

Sermon

John 3:14-21

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Introduction: Human beings—all human beings, human beings everywhere—we all want to find God. There is something inside human beings that convinces them that there is some higher power who gives and takes, who smiles and frowns, who rewards and punishes and they want to know where he is. As they search for God, they hook up with other human beings who are looking for God in the same way and in the same place. They organize themselves and identify themselves as a religious organization. We might call these organizations denominations or synods or churches.

It would be impossible to count and certainly impossible to identify all the religious organizations in the world. It would be almost as impossible to identify even all the Christian denominations in the world. We could work at naming all the Protestant denominations in North America but it wouldn't be easy. Protestants love to split into little groups and some groups don't even have a name.

Trying to count all the religious organizations or denominations in the world isn't worth five minutes of our time or effort. The truth is there are only two religious groups in the world. One group is convinced that human beings cannot find God or please God on their own, that God must find them and save them. The other group insists that human beings must do something or decide something or dream up something to get right with God. They buy into the ancient Greek proverb that "God helps those who help themselves" (which, by the way, isn't

in the Bible). Every human being on the face of the globe belongs to one or the other of those two groups. Either they give all the credit to God or they keep some of the credit for themselves. Theologians have special terms for this: **monergism** (God works alone) and **synergism** (God and I work together).

At the center of today's Gospel is the most well-known passage in the Bible. Most people even know the Bible reference: John 3:16. You see 3:16 on signs and t-shirts and tattoos; you see it at football games and political rallies and on billboards. But we need to know more than where the passage is; we need to know what the passage says. In these 26 words Jesus proclaims monergism and he destroys synergism. Finding God, being with God, saved by God has nothing to do with God and me. Living with God isn't a partnership, it's not a team effort. Life with God is entirely because of God, only God, God alone and so

All the Work is Done

His name was Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. His parents had taught him and his teachers had trained him to believe that he could get in good with God by leading a super good life. The more laws he obeyed, the closer to God he would get. This new teacher in town intrigued Nicodemus. The signs and miracles the rabbi was performing made it obvious that he had some sort of connection to God. Nicodemus had questions but he couldn't ask them in public. He came to see Jesus at night. But before Nicodemus could get one question out of his mouth, Jesus explained to him the way to get right with God: **Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again.** That made no sense to Nicodemus so Jesus said more: **Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.** Jesus was twisting and toppling everything Nicodemus had learned and believed. Obeying laws and living right would never get him right with God. Only the Holy Spirit could bring him close to God.

Poor old Nicodemus still didn't catch on. **How can this be?** So Jesus explained. **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned.**

Of course, none of this is new to us. We heard the story of the bronze snake this morning and we've heard it lots of times before. We know that the Israelites who looked up to the bronze snake survived their snake bites and we know that everyone who looks to Jesus survives the snakebites of sin and Satan. We believe that God loves us with the kind of love we can't fathom—love that's deep enough to deal with all the ugly and rotten sins we share with Adam and Eve. We believe that God loves everyone on earth with the same kind of love—that he doesn't love some people more and some people less or white people more and people of color less. We know that God's love was so intense and so determined that he sent his Son, his one and only Son, the Son he loved, to endure the punishment our sins deserved even when that punishment caused God to forsake his Son on the cross as he carried our sins. We know God chose us before we were born and that he sent his Spirit in the Word and the sacraments to create faith and preserve faith in us and we are sure that everyone who has that faith, everyone who believes in God's love in Christ has life with God now and forever. There's nothing new here and nothing for us to do here. God did it all—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. **All the work is done!** And here we sit with smiles on our faces. No Satan to accuse us, no sins to condemn us, no guilt to haunt us, no sickness to scare us, no loneliness to worry us, no temptation to deter us, no death to frighten us, no hell to fear. **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

John 3:16 is a summary of what we believe. Nicodemus came to believe that too. He stood at the cross. He laid Jesus's body in Joseph's tomb. He certainly saw Jesus alive. He came to realize that everything he had been taught and everything he believed as a do-gooder Pharisee was wrong. But Nicodemus wasn't the last Pharisee to think that getting right with God was a team effort. Jesus knew that. **Whoever believes is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead**

of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

People who love darkness don't always lurk in alleys waiting to steal or kill. People who do evil are not always mass murderers or sex traffickers. People who hate the light are not always atheists or heathens. More often they're nice people, church-goers, hard workers, good neighbors. They are not Satanic by any means, but Satan has manipulated them. They look at the love of God and assume God owes them something for being the fine people they are, that there is a spark of good in them that leads God to love them. They look at the cross of Jesus and decide they have to do something more to gain his forgiveness, pray more or pay more or spend time in Purgatory. They consider faith in Jesus to be something they have to choose, that they have to make a decision for Christ, that they have to invite Jesus into their lives before God will save them. The perfect love of God is not enough for them, the Savior's sacrifice is not enough for them, the Spirit's work through Word and sacrament is not enough for them. For them it is never God alone; it is always God and I. For them all the work is not done unless they complete it. And the darkness of these deeds pushes them into the darkness of doubt. They can never be sure they've done enough. And the darkness of doubt may lead them into the darkness of death. And we must beware that Satan doesn't lead us into this darkness. We are all synergists by nature. We like the idea of cooperating with God.

John 3:16 is a summary of what we believe. Nicodemus came to believe that and St. Paul believed it, too. We heard Paul in the Second Reading: **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.** By grace alone, by faith alone, by Scripture alone. **All the work is done.** This is what we believe in our hearts and this is what we share with our family and friends, with our neighbors and co-workers, and with the world. It's so simple and so clear and so simple to say: **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.** Amen.

The sermon was preached by Pastor James Tiefel.