

Fourth Sunday in Advent
Dec. 22, 2019
John 3:14-21

In Christ Jesus, who is God's Greatest Gift to this world of sinners, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The other day Ruth finished wrapping packages for some of our grandchildren who will be with us over Christmas. As soon as I walked in the front room I saw the brightly wrapped presents under the tree. Large and small, round and square, funny shaped with fancy wrappings and pretty bows. It is a beautiful sight—the green tree with twinkling lights reflected in the bright ornaments, and colored presents underneath. I am sure your house looks the same.

And in a few days all of those presents will be unwrapped, and gifts will be given and opened. Well this morning's sermon text tells us we have already been given the Greatest GIFT ever! The gift of Life!

THE GREATEST GIFT OF DIVINE LOVE TO THIS WORLD: GOD'S SON!

And just what does that gift of God's Son consist of?

I: The Redemption of All Mankind through the lifting up of that Son.

II: The Salvation of Mankind through faith in that Son.

Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish religious senate, the Sanhedrin. He was a Pharisee. Evidently he had heard of this Rabbi named Jesus. Perhaps he heard of Jesus' first miracle—changing water into wine. Maybe he heard of Jesus chasing out those who were buying and selling goods in the temple. Nicodemus needed to know more. But when he was told by Jesus that he must be born again in order to see the kingdom of God. He didn't understand. He asked how. And when he was told that this meant a spiritual rebirth, he again asked, **HOW CAN THESE THINGS BE?**

Jesus begins by directing Nicodemus to an Old Testament event well known by every Jew. He said: **AND AS MOSES LIFTED UP THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS, EVEN SO MUST THE SON OF MAN BE LIFTED UP, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.**

The event Jesus is referring to took place during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness by the Israelites. They had murmured and complained about no food and water and hated the manna God had miraculously provided for them on a daily basis. They questioned why they were set free from Egypt only to wander in the wilderness. So God sent poisonous snakes among them. When they were bitten they died. When the people repented of their sin, God in mercy had Moses erect a bronze snake and put it up on a pole and whoever looked at that snake believing God's promise that he would not die from the snake bite, lived.

How could a simple look of faith at a lifeless, metal replica of a snake provide a cure, a deliverance, save a life? The answer is---God caused it to be so. So also by comparison, the simple act of a dying sinner looking at the Son of Man lifted up on the cross with faith will bring a spiritual cure, deliverance and everlasting life.

Both the Old Testament type and the New Testament fulfillment defy human reason. But that is the point. Jesus wanted Nicodemus, and wants us, to despair of what our human intelligence can grasp and to rely confidently and only on what He says in His Word and does in His actions. How strange these words must have been to this work-righteous, merit-oriented Pharisee!

In one short sentence the Master Teacher has shifted the focus off of Nicodemus to Himself, the Son of Man and to the life that He gives to all mankind. Life and faith go together. Life, real life with God in His kingdom, unending life, begins the moment one places full heartfelt confidence in the Son of Man as His Lord and Savior.

Jesus repeats this thought in one of the most well known verses, most beautiful Gospel preaching in all of literature. In fact John 3:16 has been called the Gospel in a sentence. Jesus exclaims: **FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH BUT HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE.**

The source of our redemption? The Love of God! A love so amazing, so unlike sinful, human love, so beyond our comprehension. It goes beyond sentimental feelings to purposeful actions. How can God love a world of rotten, rebellious self-centered sinners; a world polluted and corrupted by our sins? His action of love toward us unlovable creatures, is prompted by nothing other than the pure loving nature of His own being. For God is love. Paul writes: **BUT GOD DEMONSTRATES HIS OWN LOVE TOWARD US, IN THAT WHILE WE WERE STILL SINNERS, CHRIST DIED FOR US.**

Notice God doesn't demand a sacrifice from us. He doesn't demand us to sacrifice ourselves—our bodies, or our children. The one demand of the Law which is perfection, condemns us all. So God's love met the demands of the Law. God's love gave His only begotten Son. Jesus lived the perfect life and Jesus made the perfect sacrifice. The Greatest Gift this world—you and I—have ever been given—is the gift of God's Son and believing in that Gift gives us the gift of eternal life.

And what universal love! It is not restricted. God loved the world—red, yellow, black, white, rich, poor, young, old, male, female, all sinners. Universal yet also distinctly personal.

Whoever believes—that means everyone who believes; Jew and Gentile alike; American and Chinese; or any nationality. But this love must be received only on an individual basis, through personal faith. Only the individual believer will benefit from this Greatest Gift of God's love.

In this verse we see both God's universal grace and His universal justice. **"God so loved"**—universal, undeserved grace! **"May not perish"**—universal justice! Without God's grace we fall under God's justice. Pharisees like Nicodemus believed that God's justice would be between the good and the bad; the Jew and the Gentile; the Circumcised and the uncircumcised. They failed to realize that in God's eyes there was and is no difference--**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** Redemption and Justice is between sinners—believing sinners and unbelieving sinners!

The Son of God was lifted up and died on the cross as a sacrifice for the sin of the whole world. All sinners—believers and unbelievers have been redeemed: that is bought back from Satan, sin, death and hell. We have been set free! All of us! Jesus, the God-Man's death; Jesus, the God-Man's blood was thrown unto the scales of God's Justice as a payment for our sins.

There is nothing to be done on our part but to receive this sacrifice; this atonement in faith; to make it our own by claiming with the heart Jesus as our own personal Savior. And this faith is also a gift of God, something only the Holy Spirit can work in us through His Word.

Jesus is not a second Law-giver for that would only bring more condemnation upon us. What a beautiful passage vs. 17 is: **FOR GOD DID NOT SEND HIS SON INTO THE WORLD TO CONDEMN THE WORLD, BUT THAT THE WORLD THROUGH HIM MIGHT BE SAVED.** Jesus, the Christ was sent into this world for mankind's salvation, to earn our redemption and for our justification; to remove the curse of the Law from us! He did not come to condemn us!

What joy---**HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM IS NOT CONDEMNED!**

What sadness---**BUT HE WHO DOES NOT BELIEVE IS CONDEMNED ALREADY, BECAUSE HE HAS NOT BELIEVED IN THE NAME OF THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON OF GOD!**

The believer in Christ receives the redemption by the sacrifice of Jesus and is saved from the judgment of damnation; while the unbeliever rejects that gift from God; rejects his only means of escape; his only way to life; his only substitute sacrifice and payment and therefore stands condemned already.

We can even see this condemnation; this verdict of judgment being carried out here on earth. Jesus says: **AND THIS IS THE CONDEMNATION, THAT THE LIGHT HAS COME INTO THE WORLD, AND MEN LOVED DARKNESS RATHER THAN LIGHT, BECAUSE THEIR DEEDS WERE EVIL. FOR EVERYONE PRACTICING EVIL HATES THE LIGHT AND DOES NOT COME TO THE LIGHT, LEST HIS DEEDS SHOULD BE EXPOSED.**

Why don't people come to the Light of God's Word, to Jesus to worship Him, to believe in Him, to live for Him and work for Him? Because they live in darkness, in the darkness of their own sin and unbelief. They are unwilling to approach the Light of the world which would expose their sins,

reprove, rebuke and condemn their way of life. They love their dark way of life. That is also why the world hates the real meaning of Christmas.

If Christmas would mean that God sent His Son only to be our example, to teach us how to live so that we could earn our own way to heaven and if Christmas would mean that God sent His Son to tell us that He condones our life-style what ever it may be then the world would love Christ and Christmas.

But Christ was sent to be our sacrifice for our sins, to pay for our sins, to expose our sinful darkness and replace it with His saving Light. What unbeliever would willingly go through what we did this morning? Have a heart-felt confession of our sins. Laying our heart and life open to our Lord and repenting of all of our evil thoughts, words and deeds.

No, just like the mole runs away from the light and goes deeper and deeper into his dark hole, so also the unbeliever shrinks away from, stays away from the Light of God's Word; from His very own Savior and rushes back into his own world of darkness and spiritual death.

But the believer, the one who knows the truth of the Word willingly, joyfully, repeatedly comes to this Light. Jesus says: **BUT HE WHO DOES THE TRUTH COMES TO THE LIGHT, THAT HIS DEEDS MAY BE CLEARLY SEEN, THAT THEY HAVE BEEN DONE IN GOD.**

The believer will be found in God's House; will spend time hearing and reading God's Word; will bask in the Sonshine of His Savior's love; will love the Light which leads to everlasting life!

What gift will you get from under your Christmas tree?

I pray that you all have already received the Greatest Gift of all—God's gift of His Son! If we have that Gift in our hearts, then every earthly gift we receive this Christmas will be one more reminder of that True Light of Christmas; the real Gift of Christmas—the Son of God who was lifted up in death so that we might have life.

Amen.