

#1766

Cf. Cf. #94 #101 #186 #629 #1079

John 3:14-21<sup>1</sup>

God reveals his love for the world  
by sending his Son  
who will be lifted up on the cross;  
whoever believes in him is saved;  
whoever does not believe in him  
is condemned.

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

*Laetare*<sup>2</sup>

Supplementary Lectionary Series "B,"  
Gospels

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<sup>14</sup> "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert (cf. Numbers 21:4-9), so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> "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. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the Name of God's One and Only Son. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever does the Truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

## GOD REVEALS HIS LOVE FOR THE WORLD

I. HE SENDS HIS SON

II. HE BRINGS TO FAITH

III. HE MOTIVATES GOOD WORKS

In the Name of Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us (cf. Galatians 2:20b), Dear Fellow-Redeemed,

The words of our text were first spoken to Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council. Nicodemus had come to Jesus secretly at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a Teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him" (3:2b). In reply, Jesus spoke a

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<sup>1</sup> *The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984. All Scripture references are taken from this translation unless noted otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> The Fourth Sunday in Lent is known as *Laetare*, which, in Latin, means "Rejoice!" We are commanded to rejoice with "Jerusalem," that is, the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints, the Fellowship of all Believers in Jesus. We reflect that rejoicing as we come to worship in God's House and hear his Word in truth and purity.

number of things to Nicodemus, including the words of our text. Included in what Jesus said, are the words that have become known as “the Gospel in a Nutshell,” John 3:16: “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.” God loved the entire world and sent his Son to redeem – pay the ransom price of his holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death – the ransom price for the entire world. That does not mean, however, that the entire world – that all mankind – will enjoy eternal life in heaven. Jesus testified to this truth when he specified that only those who believe in him “shall have eternal life.”

Those who refuse, reject and do not believe this Gospel, will not benefit from the salvation and eternal life which Jesus purchased on the cross for all. Unbelief rejects not only Jesus but also the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation that Jesus brings. At the same time, God is not to blame for this rejection. His salvation in Jesus is for all even though the benefits are not enjoyed by all. Thus, GOD REVEALS HIS LOVE FOR THE WORLD. GOD REVEALS HIS LOVE FOR THE WORLD ... I. HE SENDS HIS SON; II. HE BRINGS TO FAITH; and, III. HE MOTIVATES GOOD WORKS.

## GOD REVEALS HIS LOVE FOR THE WORLD I. HE SENDS HIS SON

Jesus says, “God so loved the world that he gave his One and Only Son!” (3:16a). What a magnificent statement! What a revelation of true love! The love that is revealed in this statement is not self-satisfying love but self-sacrificing love. It is the kind of love that desires what is best for those being loved; and, in this case, those being loved are the entire world – all mankind. Not only are all people the objects of this love but God’s entire creation is the object of this love.

The Greek word that Jesus chose to use when he said, “God so loved the world” – that Greek Word is *cosmos* [κόσμος]. Depending on the context, *cosmos* can be understood as world or universe. King David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, tells us in Psalm 145:8,9:

<sup>8</sup> ***The LORD is gracious and compassionate,  
slow to anger and rich in love.***

<sup>9</sup> ***The LORD is good to all;  
he has compassion on all he has made.***

St. Paul also hints at the salvation of all creation when he writes,

<sup>19</sup> ***The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God***  
[believers] ***to be revealed.*** <sup>20</sup> ***For the creation was subjected to***  
***frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who***  
***subjected it, in hope*** <sup>21</sup> ***that the creation itself will be liberated from its***  
***bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the***  
***children of God*** [believers in Jesus] (Romans 8:19-21).

Peter also hints at this, as does John in the Book of Revelation, when they speak of “a new heaven and a new earth” (cf. 2 Peter 3:13); and, Jesus, in eternity, making everything new (cf. Revelation 21:5). Clearly, the purpose for which God sent his Son into the world was to save.

Jesus says, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world [cosmos], but that the world [cosmos] might be saved through him” (3:17). Very easily Jesus could condemn the world; very easily, his heavenly Father could condemn the world. God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Triune and Only God – God is holy, perfect and righteous. This holy, perfect and righteous God takes no pleasure in wickedness or sin; those who do wrong will not come into God’s presence; God destroys the wicked (cf. Psalm 5:4-6). Indeed, that is what will happen to unbelievers. But those who believe in Jesus “shall not perish but have eternal life” (3:16b). Speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus also revealed how he would show his and his Father’s love for the world.

Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert (cf. Numbers 21:4-9), so the Son of Man must be lifted up” (3:14). In these words, Jesus was referring to an incident in the life and ministry of Moses.

The Children of Israel were on the last leg of their forty-year journey to Canaan, the Promised Land. As they did throughout this forty-year journey, Israel mumbled, grumbled, griped and complained along the way. In anger, God sent venomous snakes among them – called “fiery serpents” [KJV, NKJV, RSV, NASB], because their bite brought painful heat, fever and death. The people repented and asked Moses to pray for them. In answer to Moses’ prayer, the LORD told Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole. Whenever anyone was bitten by one of the venomous snakes and looked to that bronze snake lifted up on the pole, their life was spared. So also with Jesus.

Jesus would be lifted up on a pole – on the pole of the cross. By that cross, Jesus would take away the sins of the world. Whoever looked to Jesus and that cross in faith, would be saved from the results of their sins. “Whoever believes in [Jesus] shall not perish but have eternal life” (3:16b). Jesus expresses this same saving activity using the figurative terms of light and darkness.

Jesus said, “Light has come into the world” (3:19b). In the opening words of this Gospel, John used the same figurative terms. John wrote, “In him [in Jesus] was life, and that life was the light of men. The Light shines in the darkness ...” (1:4,5a). Concerning himself, Jesus said, “I am the Light of the world” (John 8:12b; cf. 9:5b). Jesus’ work of redeeming the world comes through his cross – his being lifted up on the cross, even as Moses lifted up the brass serpent on a pole in the wilderness.

#### APPROPRIATION

God sent his Son into the world to save the world. The only way that saving work would take place was through the cross – through Jesus’ being lifted up on the cross. This message of the cross is the central theme of the Christian religion.

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). It is through the cross and only through the cross that Jesus brought salvation for all mankind – for the world. This is different from all the other religions in the world.

All of the other religions in the world depend upon a person doing something to place himself in a right and saving relationship with God. Even some so-called “Christian” religions add that it is not enough to believe in Jesus, but a person has to be a certain kind of person, have a certain kind of character, and has to do something in addition to his faith to earn or merit the forgiveness of sins and salvation. First of all, mankind cannot “do” anything to put himself into a right and saving relationship with God, nor can a person add to his faith. Secondly, the Bible makes it clear that the only way to have salvation is by faith alone in Jesus.

First, a person can do nothing to add to his faith or put himself into a right and saving relationship with God. St. Paul writes to the Ephesians,

***2:1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins....<sup>3</sup> Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.<sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,<sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:1,3b-5).***

To be saved “by grace” means to be saved without any worth, merit, effort or quality of character on a person’s part. Grace is God’s undeserved love. If a person says he or she has to add something to that grace in order to be saved, then that person has taken away from God’s grace as a free and undeserved gift. Then there is the second point.

The second point that the Bible makes is that the only way to have eternal salvation is through faith in Jesus. Jesus told his disciples, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). “Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit,” repeated this same truth when he said, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other Name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:8a,12) – the “Name” to which Peter was referring is “Jesus.”

Forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation come through Jesus alone. Forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation has been earned by Jesus for all, “For God so loved the world [cosmos] that he gave his One and Only Son” (John 3:16a). The fact that Jesus earned forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation for all, does not mean, however, that everyone will be in heaven in eternity. A person grasps and benefits from Jesus’ work of salvation by faith alone.

## GOD REVEALS HIS LOVE FOR THE WORLD II. HE BRINGS TO FAITH

Recall that Jesus referred Nicodemus back to the incident in the Old Testament when God directed Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it up on a pole. When the people who had been bitten by the venomous serpents looked in faith to that bronze serpent Moses had made and lifted up, they were saved from the bites of the poisonous snakes. So it would be with those who looked in faith to Jesus.

Jesus says, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert (cf. Numbers 21:4-9), so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (3:14,15). “Everyone who believes” in Jesus, “the Son of Man” and “the Son of God,” will “have eternal life.” Jesus makes this truth clear when he distinguishes between believers and unbelievers.

Jesus says, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the Name of God’s One and Only Son” (3:18). For those who do not believe in Jesus, their condemnation is upon them even now in this life. The condemnation and judgment of unbelievers will be carried out to its fullest in eternity, when they are placed in hell – where “their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome” (Isaiah 66:24b); hell is that place of outer darkness where there is only weeping and gnashing of teeth (cf. Matthew 8:12b; 13:42b,50; 22:13b; 24:51b; 25:30b); hell is the lake of burning sulfur into which the devil, his demon-angels and all unbelievers are thrown (cf. Revelation 20:10,14,15). Jesus reinforces this condemnation and judgment by using terms of light and darkness.

Jesus says,

***<sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed (3:19,20).***

Sinful, wicked, unrepentant, unregenerate, unbelieving mankind, love darkness – the darkness of unbelief, rejection and hiding. Sinful, wicked, unrepentant, unregenerate, unbelieving mankind, will not come into the Light of Christ Jesus – the Light of the world – because that would mean that they would have to admit that there is nothing good in them to merit in anyway forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation. Unbelievers continue into the darkness and torment of hell for eternity.

#### APPROPRIATION

When do you suppose that most crimes take place in our society? I am sure you hear enough about crime in Flint, Saginaw and Detroit. When does most of it take place? Is it not at night? Why? Because those engaged in criminal activity do not want to be exposed to light and thus be witnessed in the commission of crime and be brought to justice. Jesus’ use of light and darkness is appropriate.

Imagine how you and I would feel and react – imagine our shame and embarrassment – if, when we are engaged in some wicked, shameful and sinful activity – if when we are spewing forth some vicious or hurtful remark, some curse or obscenity – if when we are engaged in some sinful, wicked and adulterous thought – imagine how you and I would feel and react if Jesus appeared right at that moment in the bright and blinding light of his glory and splendor! As a matter of fact, Jesus does make such an appearance to you and to me – through his Word.

In his Word Jesus asks us, “Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?” declares the LORD. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 23:24; cf. Ephesians 1:23b). There is no place where you or I can hide and escape from the all-seeing eyes of Jesus. In addition, Jesus tells us in the Bible,

***<sup>12</sup> ... the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. <sup>13</sup> Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:12,13).***

We – you and I – must give an account. We must give an account to God for our wickedness and sinfulness. But, Jesus has already done that! Jesus has already given an account for us!

Jesus has given an account to God for us. Jesus was made to be sin for us – Jesus is our substitute (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus took upon himself our guilt and the punishment we deserved. Jesus was “lifted up” on the pole of the cross as the punishment for our sins in place of us. This Gospel – this Good News about what Jesus did and accomplished – is that which works faith in our hearts, so that we grasp and benefit from the forgiveness of sins that Jesus earned for us.

St. Paul writes to the Thessalonians,

***<sup>13</sup> But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the LORD, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the Truth. <sup>14</sup> He called you to this through our Gospel, that you might share in the Glory of our LORD Jesus Christ. <sup>15</sup> So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by Word of mouth or by letter [epistle] (2 Thessalonians 2:13-15).***

Stand firm in the faith which the Holy Spirit has worked in you through the Gospel of Jesus. By this faith in Jesus, you are not condemned.

“Everyone who believes in [Jesus will] have eternal life.... Whoever believes in [Jesus] shall not perish but have eternal life.... Whoever believes in [Jesus] is not condemned” (3:15,16b,

18a). Again and again our text and the entire Bible proclaim this truth: It is by faith alone in Jesus that we benefit from the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation that Jesus earned for all. We are brought to that saving faith in Jesus by the Holy Spirit who works through the Gospel of Jesus.

As mentioned previously, our good works or commendable character do absolutely nothing for us to merit or deserve faith and salvation. Yet, that does not mean that good works are bad or that the Christian should not be doing good works.

### GOD REVEALS HIS LOVE FOR THE WORLD III. HE MOTIVATES GOOD WORKS

Jesus says,

***19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever does the Truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through [in, by] God (3:19-21).***

These verses refer to a difference between good works and wicked, evil, sinful, and morally depraved works. We have already seen that those who act outwardly wicked in society, prefer to do so at night – in the darkness. Such evil-doers and criminals do not want to be seen and witnessed in daylight, for then they might be arrested and brought to justice. By contrast, Jesus refers to those who do “the Truth” and come “into the light” (3:21a). There are two aspects of “doing the Truth.”

The first aspect of “doing the Truth” was explained by Jesus to his disciples when he said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 6:14). Jesus is the Truth. This reference refers to faith in Jesus, for Jesus adds, “No one comes to the Father except through me” – through faith in Jesus.

The second aspect of “doing the Truth” – or “[living] by the Truth” as the New International Version translates it – the second aspect is putting God’s Word into practice in one’s daily life as a Christian. Jesus was actually referring to both aspects when he prayed to his heavenly Father for his disciples, “Sanctify them by the Truth; your Word is Truth” (17:17). The believer is sanctified by the Truth of God’s Word, when the Holy Spirit uses that Word – the Gospel – to bring the person to faith. The believer then uses that Word – the Truth of God’s Word – as the guide in his or her daily life.

All credit, glory and praise for the good works that a believer does, belong to God. Isaiah tells us, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6a). The Apostle Paul repeats this truth, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). So, whatever “good” the believer produces in

God's sight, is good only by faith in Jesus and is motivated by the faith and salvation that God has given in Jesus.

St. Paul writes to the Philippians, "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). God, who brought the believer to faith in Jesus through the Gospel, also works in the believer to want and to desire to do God's will and to act in accordance with God's will in his or her daily life. While unbelievers want the darkness so that their wickedness is not exposed, believers, having the forgiveness of sins in Jesus, do "the Truth" and have been brought "into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what [they have] done has been done through [or, in] God" (3:21).

#### APPLICATION

You and I too are forced to confess along with Isaiah: "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6a). We are forced to join St. Paul in his confession: "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature" (Romans 7:18a). We tearfully join King David in confessing, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). But ... "But," St. Paul assures us, "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the Name of the LORD Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11b). St. Paul is reminding you and me that we have been brought to faith in Jesus and so we "shall not perish but have eternal life" (3:16b). We have eternal life now. We shall enjoy eternal life to its fullest forever in heaven with Jesus. That salvation is the motivation for our good works.

You and I will bring forth fruits of faith in good works – especially good works that serve our neighbor – those around us – friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbors, co-workers. Yet, there will be for us a daily struggle. In this life, we still carry around the Old Adam, the sinful nature. We are at the same time saint and sinner. Our daily struggle, however, brings us back to the foot of the cross of our Savior Jesus, who was lifted up, so that all who believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life. With that assurance in our hearts daily through God's Word, we continue in our struggle against sin and labor doing good works through Jesus our Savior.

#### CONCLUSION

"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" (3:16). God's love for us has been revealed especially in Jesus, who was lifted up on the cross to take away the sins of the world – therefore, also, to take away our sins. The forgiveness of sins that you and I have in Jesus will be the motivation for us daily to fight temptation and sin, and daily to bring forth the fruits of faith in good works, as we love and serve others as we ourselves have been loved and served. Amen.