

Fourth Sunday in Lent; Year B
John 3:1-16

(Hold up sign)

John 3:16.

We know this sign, don't we?

We have probably seen it most often at football games when it's held up between the goal-posts during the extra-point attempt following a touchdown;

but we've also seen it at other sporting events and gatherings where there are large crowds.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

It's been called "The Gospel in a nutshell," and it's by far the best-known and oft-memorized verse in all of the Bible.

The ones who hold up the sign at sporting events and who love the verse the most are self-described born-again Christians.

They call themselves born-again because of the context in which this verse appears in John's gospel.

Chapter Three begins with the story of Nicodemus.

Maybe you remember the story.

Nicodemus was a leader of the Jews.

He was also a seeker and he was curious about Jesus, so he sought out Jesus in the dark of the night.

Evidently his prominent position in the community made him nervous, so he encountered Jesus at night, and he said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

And Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Jesus' response confused Nicodemus.

He asked, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus continued the exchange by saying, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."

So this is the story where the notion of being born again originated, and this is why some followers of Jesus who

believe that they have experienced a particular kind of baptism in the Spirit describe themselves as born-again. But let's go back to the part of the story we heard this morning.

As Jesus and Nicodemus continued their dialogue, Jesus said, "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who has descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Do you remember Moses and the serpent in the wilderness? The story comes from the Book of Numbers where we read about Moses and the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. The Israelites asked Moses why he had brought them out of Egypt to die in the wilderness, and they complained that there was no water or food.

The story tells us that in response to all of the complaining the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, and that many of the Israelites died. In compassion Moses prayed for the people.

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And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent and set it upon a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look upon it and live.”

So Moses made a serpent out of bronze, and put it on a pole, and whenever a snake bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

So here we are on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, and we have Jesus foretelling his crucifixion with the story of Moses and the serpent being lifted up in the wilderness.

And then comes the famous verse, “the Gospel in a nutshell,” “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.”

It’s great to memorize that verse, and I guess it’s fine to hold it up at football games, but what exactly does it mean?

Some people argue that the verse is talking about degree: God so loved the world, or God loved the world so much, that he gave his only Son.

Others argue, and this is actually closer to the meaning of the Greek, that the verse is talking about manner: This is how God loved the world, he gave his only Son.

But no matter how you interpret this short little verse, what I want to know is what do we do with the verses that come after verse 16.

Do you remember that part of the passage?

This passage clearly conveys a wonderful message about God's unconditional love and the salvation that is offered to us in Jesus Christ, but following that message there is some pretty tough talk about evil and darkness and condemnation. We heard that even though light has come into the world, some people move away from the light and choose to live in darkness.

What are we supposed to do with that part of the passage.

Let me share a little piece of my own life with you.

When I was slaying dragons and storming castles while I was engaged in full-time ministry in a big, busy parish before my so-called retirement, I allowed myself to believe that I didn't have time to commit to a regular fitness regimen.

My days were just too long and life was too crazy.

At the time in my life when I needed it most, I let myself believe that there was just no way I could find the time for regular exercise.

Another way of saying that would be to say that I chose darkness instead of the light.

But let's be clear, when I made that choice God didn't condemn me to being flabby and a lack of energy and achy joints, I condemned myself to those things.

When we moved back down to San Diego it wasn't too long before Jane Strane said, "We ought to go check out the YMCA in Mission Valley."

Well, in the early morning I was walking five miles in Mission Bay Park, so I didn't have any interest in seeing the Y.

But then, after a while, I wasn't walking in Mission Bay Park, and Jane Strane asked again, "Do you want to go look at the Y?"

I still had no interest.

I might as well have said, "No, I think I'll just stay in the dark."

Finally one day, and I honestly can't tell you what changed, I said to Jane, "Why don't we go check out the Y in Mission Valley?"

We joined the Y, and I've been going ever since.

Let's hear it for the light!

But since we're in Lent, and since Lent is a season for truth-telling, I have to confess to you that maintaining a regular regimen at the Y isn't easy for me.

I've heard runners and other athletes talk about the "endorphin high," or the "endorphin rush," but I've got to tell you, I haven't experienced it yet.

There's a psychological high, a good feeling about having hauled myself out of bed, and even though I can't see a whole lot of difference, I want to believe that there has to be something good going on with my body.

But even so, knowing how important it is, and having a sincere commitment to the routine, there are some days when I choose the darkness I'm in instead of the light I know I need.

And that 's the way it is with all of us.

It's human nature.

The places where I engage in my struggles with darkness verses light may not be the same places where you do battle, but if we're alive, we all struggle.

Sometimes it's a minor skirmish and sometimes it's all-out war, but we all struggle.

The message in this seemingly simple Bible passage that actually turns out to be pretty complex, is that God's love is unconditional, and that if we will look to Jesus Christ, the same way the Israelites looked to the bronze serpent in the wilderness, victory and new life and eternal salvation will be ours.

Lent means spring, and in our part of the world spring is a time for greening and growing and blooming and new birth. The seeds for our salvation were sewn in each of us in the events we are now so close to celebrating, in the horrible death on Mt. Calvary and in the discovery three days later of the empty tomb.

As we get closer and closer to Jerusalem, now is a time for each of us to do a prayerful, honest personal inventory. And then, with God as our helper, it's a time for choosing the light.

Remember, we're human, so it won't be a once-and-forever choice, but even so, now is a time for deciding that we want to choose the light.

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