

Today's familiar Gospel reading from John begins with a comparison to an obscure, rather strange Old Testament story. While in the wilderness, Moses responded to the "people's repentance and God's salvific intervention" by lifting up a bronze snake as a healing reminder to the people. So, begins our Gospel text as a reference to Jesus' own lifting up on the cross as the means to our own healing from the effects of sin. [Lectionary Homiletics, Vol. XXVI, No. 2, p. 50]. The Son of Man must be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. The verb, "to believe," appears more often in John than in any other New Testament writing, and the noun, "faith," doesn't appear at all. I don't want to make too much of this, but it suggests to me John's emphasis is on action, an active belief, a participatory belief. Perhaps, not just something you have, like faith, but something you're actively doing, like believing.

This brings us to, what Martin Luther called, "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." Familiar and reassuring, this may be the most quoted verse in the New Testament. Many of you remember Pastor Emery Roy, who was an assistant, that an associate pastor of this church in the '70s and then returned in the '90s as a parttime parish associate, or visitation pastor. When his wife, Corinne died, Emery requested this verse be read at her funeral. However, he wanted to make sure I also included verse 17: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Emery knew these verses belonged together, that salvation wasn't just for individuals who believed, but salvation is intended for the whole world, for all of creation. For God so loved the whole world.

Can we imagine all of Scripture as God's love story, from Genesis to Revelation, from creation to the end times? – all a love story. It was love that saved Noah and his family, along with all of creation; it was love that called Abraham and Sarah to become God's chosen people; it was love that gave Moses the law for guidance and order; it was love that saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, that saved the people from their own sinfulness in today's Old Testament story in Numbers. It was divine love, stronger than well-deserved judgment, that watched over the Israelites in exile. It was love that came to a young peasant girl in Nazareth that proclaimed she would give birth to a child, whose life would save the world. It was that love incarnate who taught us that love is not just for those who look like us or think like us or believe like us. -that love is extended even to our enemies, and to those who persecute us. It was love that drove the early church to open their doors, not only to Jews, but to Gentiles as well, to open the doors, not only to those society thought were worthy, but to all, including those who were poor, or marginalized, or oppressed. For God so loved the whole world. [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2, p. 118]

John also reminds us that eternal life is given to those who believe today, to those who have already made the decision to believe, suggesting that eternal life begins, not only at the time of our resurrection, but actually begins at the moment of belief. Eternal life is available to the believer. We are living our eternal life right now. (pause)

This is all a lovely story. This is all very Good News; truly, it is. But, where does belief fit into this love story? Where does faith fit into this story? John reminds us that Jesus came into the world to save the world, but John also calls on us to respond by believing.

The Gospel is complicated. The Bible doesn't always give us one clear interpretation, even to this familiar and much loved text. Using the phrase "everyone who believes" suggests inclusivity, but John 3:16 also announces that the "alternative to believing is perishing." There doesn't appear to be any middle ground. You either believe or you don't. To believe is to have eternal life starting right now; to not believe is to perish. But the Son of Man came into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved.

A candidate for ordination – it wasn't me but it might as well have been me – included in her statement of faith the certain conviction that God's love extends to all people. A few sentences later she affirmed that those who place their faith in Christ are saved. One of the examiners, noting both declarations, asked, "Which one is it?" Does God love all people, or only those who have faith in Christ as Lord and Savior? Once ordained, will the candidate preach God's unreserved love, or that divine love is only potential and conditional, waiting for human faith before it is fully given?" "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." Which one is it? [ibid.]

We're at, what Presbyterian Joseph Small writes, a "theological mystery... which resolves to plumb the depths of theological tensions in order to probe more deeply into the riches of the gospel." He goes on to add that, if we focus on God's grace, we may be in danger of making salvation an arbitrary act, with no essential place for human response. If we focus on human faith, we may be in danger of making salvation a human accomplishment, not a divine gift. [ibid., pp. 118, 120]

Verse 19 begins, "And this is the judgment." The Greek word for judgment is *krisis*, from which we get the word, *crisis*, making the verse "And this is the crisis, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light." The people had a decision to make. Do they believe and live in the light, or do they not, and continue to live in the darkness? [ibid. p. 121]

Lent is a time of repentance and reflection; it's a perfect time for decision-making as well. What is it you believe? Have you come to the light; will you come to the light of Jesus Christ? In the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, prayed at the time of communion, about 2/3 of the way through, I say, "Great is the mystery of faith." This Great Prayer isn't the same every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, but these words are always included, Great is the mystery of faith. I believe with my whole heart, and invite you to join me, the Holy Spirit's got this; the Holy Spirit's got us. I don't know how, really, but I have an inkling as to why. God, who has loved us from the very beginning of time, who came to us as the Word Incarnate, who we know as Jesus the Christ, will not give up on us now. Indeed, great is the mystery of faith. Amen.