

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
John 3:14-21 Fourth Sunday in Lent

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14Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

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. 17For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18Whoever 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. 19This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

Let us pray.  
O come Holy Spirit.  
Come as the fire, and burn  
Come as the wind, and cleanse  
Come as the light, and reveal  
Come as the water, and refresh.  
Convict, convert and consecrate us,  
Until we are wholly yours.  
Amen.

I used to think that there were verses in the Bible about football. I knew the one about baseball—"In the Big Inning", but I couldn't figure out what our holy scriptures had to say about football. Was it about turning the other cheek? No, probably not, didn't seem like that apply. Was it "Thou shalt not steal?" No, seems that one doesn't apply either—it would be bad defensive strategy. But there had to be something in the Good Book about football, after all, fans in the bleachers were always holding up big signs that read: John 3:16. As a child I knew enough to know that it was a Bible verse, but I wasn't sure what that Bible verse--that so obviously applied to football for as many times as it was quoted from the bleachers--was all about. And so I finally looked it up—"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Hmm . . . The application to the iron grid still eluded me. Was it the risk to a player's life inherent in a sport that involved four or five other adult men throwing their bodies on top of yours? Could be. Bodily harm and even death seemed a possible outcome of the goings on out there on the field. Was the sign with John 3:16 written in spray paint a reminder to the players that if they met their maker in the form of a 300 pound defensive lineman, they surely would wake up and find themselves in heavenly paradise?

Even now, as an adult, I'm stymied by the popularity of citing this Bible verse from the bleachers. Am I completely missing something here? As I studied this passage and what scholars had to say about it I found nothing that had any real application to football or any other kind of sports. But as I studied the verses immediately preceding this infamous one, if you look at John 3:14 and 15, the reason for all of those John 3:16 signs

becomes a bit more clear. Indeed, they really have nothing to do with football, but rather are all about exposure. John 3:14 and 15 say, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Here in lies the reason for the signs—the need to follow Jesus’ word to lift up the Son of Man. To lift up means, in part, to let it be known. It’s like how we lift up someone’s name in prayer. So too then are we as Christians compelled to lift up Jesus—to let his message be known throughout the world. Think about it, if there is a life or death message you need to share with as many people as possible in as short a time as possible—what better way than a huge banner in a stadium filled with thousands that is broadcast to an audience of millions? It’s an effective form of communication . . . kind of.

And I say kind of, because who, other than a Christian relatively well-versed in the Holy Scriptures, knows what this passage even is? I doubt that when Joe Schmoe watching the game reclined in his lazy boy catches a glimpse of that sign as the cameras pan the crowds in the bleachers—I doubt that Joe Schmoe puts down his beer, sets aside the bowl of popcorn on his lap, and leaps up to grab his dusty old Bible to see what all the fuss is about. And if Joe Schmoe does know what John 3:16 says, well then his heart might be warmed by the affirmation from his kindred spirit, but it likely ends there.

And that, I’m afraid, is one of the biggest problems we as Christians have. We have a tendency to preach to the choir. We use insider language. We practice ancient rituals and customs that when taken out of our religious context, must appear downright wacky, even disgusting, to the average outsider. Think of it. I say, “This is my body broken for you” and then we all eat it. That’s gross. It’s not gross to us—it’s sacred and meaningful for us because we know the story—but to an outsider it’s no more than a some kind of sick cult ritual.

As Christians, I don’t think we need to be so focused on John 3:16, we basically have that one covered—it’s the belief around which we base our lives and many of us can quote it verbatim—“For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” It’s a good one to know. It’s the reason why we do wacky things like eat bread pretending it is a body and splash cold water all over our babies during baptism. But concentrating on it too heavily, painting it over and over again on old bed sheets to be unfurled in the bleachers isn’t really where it’s at. There’s got to be a better way for us to tell the story of Jesus, to, as these verses up it, lift up Jesus.

Some folks have been doing it here during Lent, lifting up Jesus as they tell their personal stories of faith. And though it’s been inspiring and meaningful and we’ll surely be doing it some more in the future, it’s still a little bit of preaching to the choir, telling a story that though special and unique—is not terribly unfamiliar. We understand what they’re saying, they’re speaking our language.

In addition to lifting Jesus up to each other, we also need to be focusing on how we’re lifting Jesus up—how we’re telling our faith stories to those outside these walls. The

question for us to consider as we travel through this week of our Lenten journeys is, “How am I lifting up Jesus?”

It can be an uncomfortable sort of thing to do. After all, we don’t want people to think we’re crazy Bible-thumping, Jesus freaks and so we often don’t say anything about our faith at all. And yet Jesus is telling us that we’d better start—that we’d better start lifting him up otherwise people will perish—it’s a life or death matter.

And I agree that it is—it is a life or death matter—but not in the way some of our Christian brothers and sisters see it. Many consider these verses from John to be the basic doctrine of Christian salvation—that if you believe in Jesus then you’re saved and all is well. But if you don’t believe in Jesus, you will perish—often crudely boiled down to as—if you’re not a Christian, you’re gonna burn in hell. But I don’t believe that. But I do believe that lifting up the Son of Man, the one we commonly refer to as Jesus, is a matter of life and death—and that we can save lives, we can keep people from, as Jesus puts it, perishing, without saying a word.

Indeed, some think this is a message about proselytizing—getting the word out about Jesus. But, what is far more important than talking about Jesus is trying to BE like Jesus. Imitation is the most sincere form of flattery and so don’t our actions go so much farther than words. Though awkward, it’s surely easier to tell a story of faith than it is to live a story of faith. Our witness is so much more authentic, our testimony of God’s work in our life so much more believable, if we actually do what we say we believe.

When we do what Jesus did—we are lifting him up, plain and simple. And when we lift him up—we save lives. When we feed people—we lift Jesus up and we save lives. When we shelter people—we lift Jesus up and we save lives. When we stand outside on a cold winter’s morning to protest injustice and violence—we lift Jesus up and we save lives. When we sign a petition for stronger child support enforcement or more community policing—we lift Jesus up and we save lives. When we say no to racist and over-zealous proposed immigration policies that would make it illegal to give a cup of water to a Mexican child who will die of dehydration in the desert if that water is withheld—we lift Jesus up and we save lives. Indeed, lifting Jesus up is a matter of life and death. These actions are not proselytizing, they are the ways in which we participate in God’s saving work in our world.

And what an honor it is, what an amazing gift we’ve been given, to be invited to be part of God’s plan for peace, justice, and love. It is life saving work. And it doesn’t just save others lives, it saves ours too. For each time we tell our story of faith, each time we lift Jesus up, we remind ourselves again of God’s amazing grace. Sometimes one of you will come to me after church and say—“I needed to hear what was said in the sermon this morning. It’s like you wrote it for me.” And I thank God when that happens—glad to know that the Spirit has moved in such a way that you have been touched by the message. But lest you begin to think that I design my messages for any one of you, let me just say that I’m far too selfish and self-absorbed for that. In fact, I’m usually not even preaching to the choir, I’m usually preaching to the preacher. I, just as much as any

one of you, need to be reminded of God's grace each and every day. I, just as much as any one of you, struggle with these biblical texts and yearn to figure out how they apply to my life. I, just as much as any one of you, wonder how I can lift Jesus up in this day and age without looking like a fool but while also being an effective and productive witness to Christ. And it is my great honor and joy in life to do what I do, to have you overhearing these sermons I'm writing for myself in hopes that they address, in some way, the struggles, hopes, and challenges we all face on our faith journeys. For in doing this work, I am given life each time I witness the ways each of you are lifting up Jesus in your lives. Surely, being upheld and loved by this community keeps us from perishing as together we move ever closer to God and the eternal life we've been promised.

If we're going to lift Jesus up, surely there's no need for us to spray paint another bed sheet or grab our Bibles and run downtown to start reading these passages aloud to folks as they walk past on their way to the 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel for breakfast after church. But surely the world is in desperate need of our witness, in desperate need for us to share the Good News of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection when, in our stories—and especially in our lives—we lift Jesus up.