

Christ Episcopal Church
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Fourth Sunday in Lent (B)
March 11, 2018

DRAFT

8 AM and 10 AM homilies
by the Rev. Joe Parrish
“The light that overcomes”
The Holy Gospel according to

John 3:14-21

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.

“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. 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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are

condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Give us that life that never ends, and we will be joyful, Lord. Amen.

A few years ago I heard a talk by the head of the joint Smithsonian-Harvard Department of Astrophysics in which he said the universe as we know it now is composed of about one third Light Matter and about two-thirds Dark Matter. The apparently empty space between galaxies and stars is actually Dark Matter. And at the center of each galaxy is a Black Hole, the epitome of Dark Matter, a huge gravitational object

that is drawing all light and light matter of each galaxy into itself slowly and certainly. In a number of billion years everything we see now will slowly be engulfed by these Black Holes. Yet light will still abound, just not our light in this galaxy. These ideas are what drive some to search ways to have intergalactic space flight as envisioned by several contemporary sci-fi space stories on television and elsewhere.

And we have concepts of Worm Holes and Wrinkles in Time that entice us to think that one day we humans may be

able to outskirt the inevitable death of our galaxy, our solar system, and our planet. But try as we may, some black hole or another will slowly engulf every galaxy in time. The universe as we know it is eventually doomed to final decay, although now it is expanding rapidly. Ultimately, however, the universe is both finite in size and in length of duration. A Christian space explorer will see the basic logic of a religion that says that ultimately Light will overcome Darkness, but that overcoming is not in this universe but in

a reality we call the Kingdom of God, which is not within our universe. We are in the Mind of God who made this universe of ours in the first place some fourteen billion years ago. We are all space travelers. And now astronomers say our galaxy and its nearer related galaxies are in the middle of the largest Void in the Universe; and our very planet which is at the edge of the Milky Way Galaxy is itself in the middle of the Universe. We have prime seats to observe the Universe in all its glory and ultimately in its demise.

The words we read in the Gospel according to John today are speaking in a language that first century hearers would never understand, and which we are only at the very front edge of understanding.

But the words of Christ are indeed words of eternal life, not of life in this universe but life in the realm of God that far exceeds this Universe.

Christ's words also encapsulate what we know innately, that most of the world is engulfed in the darkness of evil and loves darkness because their deeds

are not so obvious when darkness and sin abound; but the Light of Christ brings all of our deeds and the deeds of others into glaring focus, eventually exposing those who do evil and separating us who follow the True God and travel in God's ways, separating us from the evil ones. And just maybe we can bring some bit of Christ's light to others who are not Children of Darkness and help rescue them from the Evil One. That is our constant challenge. And the Light that we follow in Christ continues to purify and refine us to be more

Christ-like and better able to follow the Light of Christ.

Tom, a member of Lutheran pastor David Lose's congregation, told David this story. Several nights earlier, Tom's six year-old son, Benjamin, protested his bedtime. Frustrated by his father's refusal to budge, Benjamin finally became so frustrated that he said, "Daddy, I hate you!" Tom, possessing the presence of mind Rev. David said he wishes he more frequently had-- especially when dealing with his own children—Tom replied, 'I'm sorry you

feel that way, Ben, but I love you.’ And then what do you think young Benjamin said? ‘Oh, it's okay’? Or maybe,

‘Sorry, Dad. I love you, too’? Nope.

When Tom told his son that he loved him, Benjamin yelled back, ‘Don't say that!’ Surprised, Tom continued, ‘But, Ben, but it's true--I love you.’ ‘Don't say that, Daddy.’ ‘But I love you, Ben.’ ‘Stop saying that, Daddy! Stop saying it right now!’ And then it came, Tom reported, almost completely unbidden: ‘Benjamin, now listen to me: I love you...like it or not!’

That is what God is saying to us through this Gospel lesson today, ‘I love you...like it or not!’

http://day1.org/3635-like_it_or_not

God’s love for us is not dependent on our love for God. God loves us even in spite of our selfish selves. God loves us unconditionally. We and all of humanity can do nothing but accept or flee that love God has for us through God’s Son Jesus Christ.

Lutheran Pastor David Zersen wrote, ‘I found it interesting to read that during Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s time—

Bonhoeffer, a famous Christian pastor and leader who was eventually executed by Adolph Hitler, during Dietrich Bonhoeffer's time--specifically in 1933, roughly 2,500 of the Protestant clergy sided with Hitler, an equal number of about 2,500 opposed Hitler, and roughly 15,000 took no stand at all. Fifteen thousand said, "there's not yet enough evidence to convince me that this situation implicates me!" Now ask ourselves which issues in our own time require us to notice that there is

darkness around us, that our feet are standing in the miry clay.'

David Zersen continues, 'I don't think I ever understood the meaning of Frederick Faber's old hymn, "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea," until I thought of the Hebrew meaning of salvation. To be saved through that love in which Jesus lived and died for us is to be freed from narrow strictures, confined attitudes, and entrapments of our own making. The love which Jesus shows frees us to be open about who we are,

what we have done, and what we are afraid to do. God does not limit our lives and possibilities; rather God opens doors and tears down walls.'

<http://www.theologie.uzh.ch/predigten/archiv-8/060326-6-e.html>

God loves you this much (arms stretched out wide apart.)

After his grandfather's death, Donald Hall, the poet laureate of New Hampshire, went into his grandfather's attic and found many, many boxes, one of which was filled with short pieces of string. The box was marked in an old

hand: STRING TOO SHORT TO BE
SAVED. He was astonished. The box
of string had caught him completely off-
guard. And from his off-guardedness
and un-guardedness, he was able to
write a beautiful poem. The poem states
the obvious: his grandfather had saved
the string that was too short to be saved.
If you have ever felt like you were a
string too short to be saved, you can
begin to come to know what it means to
be accepted by God, in Jesus Christ.

<http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/18/052718a.html>

There's a story about a little third grader named Annie, whose Sunday School teacher, anxious to know something about the religious level of readiness of her pupils, asked each child in the class this penetrating question: 'Why do you believe in God?' The answers were interesting; as the children, one by one, expressed their reason for believing. Annie waited nervously for her turn. Then the teacher

put the question: ‘Annie, why do you believe in God?’ Annie fidgeted for a moment, then replied, ‘I guess it just runs in our family.’

Blessed indeed is the child for whom believing begins with Grace at the family table, bedside prayers, godley parental reminders, and Sunday School. Later in life the child may critically reexamine his or her childhood conceptions of God. New understanding may alter patterns of belief. But it can be disastrous for a child to pass into youth and adulthood

with little or no foundation in religious nurture, to match the inevitable challenge and changes which are a part of growing up.

Without a home centered foundation of religious values and beliefs, as part of parental nurture, a growing child's morality, ethics, and life purpose is disproportionately shaped by television and a multiplicity of media manipulation, secularized education, and the heavy weight of peer pressure. Without a spiritual centerpiece, young and old grab at one glittering fragment

of life after another, without an integrating center of balance or belief.

<http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/18/052718c.html>

John the XXIII (23rd) said it perfectly: ‘We are called from where we are, not from where we ought to be.’

<http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/18/052718J.html>

Leslie Weatherhead, a brilliant cleric of England, was interviewed by the London Times. He was asked: “Dr. Weatherhead, what do you think Jesus meant by the words 'eternal life'?”

Weatherhead talked about eternal life as something here and now. It was a quality of life, a spiritual dimension to life. The interviewer was troubled and said, “I thought eternal life had to do with after you died.” “No,” said Rev. Weatherhead, “that is not right. If you read the gospels and especially if you read the gospel according to John, it is very clear that the gift and beauty of eternal life is something that can be realized right now!”

Then the reporter, quite puzzled by all of this, said, “Then, sir, what is the

quality of eternal life?” Weatherhead said, “The quality of eternal life now is to live your life in harmony with God.” You do not have to live to be four hundred years old. You do not have to wait until after you die.

<http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/18/052718o.html>

“Eternal life” appears for the first time in John 3:15. The phrase appears a total of seventeen times in John (cf. 20:31). Eternal life is possible because Jesus will be “lifted up” on the cross,

raised up from death, and finally lifted up to heaven.

<http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/18/052718s.html>

Augustine was one of the most influential theologians in the developing years of the Christian church. And yet, like most of us, he had a hard time understanding the doctrine of the Trinity. What does it mean to say that there are three persons in just one God? The story goes that one day St. Augustine went for a walk on the beach. He saw a little boy digging a hole in the

sand with a sea shell and then running to the ocean, filling up the shell, and rushing back to pour it into the hole he had made. ‘What are you doing, my little man?’ Augustine asked. ‘I’m trying to put the ocean in this hole,’ the boy replied. And peace came to Augustine's soul as he realized that this was indeed what he had been trying to do. He had been trying to put God into his mind completely.

One of the consequences of expanding our image of God is that we must also expand our image of

ourselves. If the God Beyond Us is also the God Among Us and the God Within Us—if God chooses to be intimately involved in the being and becoming of the world—then we too are called to be intimately involved in the being and becoming of the world—allowing the God image in us to unfold and overflow into the people and places around us.

<http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/18/052718JJ.html>

God so loved the world, that no matter from where we have come or where we are going, we are always in

the loving arms of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. We can offend him, yet he will love us. We cannot go far enough to get away from God, ever.

God knows us completely and is always there with open arms to receive us into himself, and to guide our lives we yet have to live. Let us always live and walk in the light of Christ.

Amen.

Description:

Christ is our light in this world. With his light we can find our way to God through him. We are never beyond God's love for us. Ever.

Tags:

Universe, black, dark, light, matter,
astrophysics, love, eternal, life, void,
hole, foundation, string, space, flight,
galaxy, planet, Harvard, Smithsonian,
St. Augustine, Weatherhead, London,
Times, John the XXIII, New Hampshire,
sea, shell, beach, sand, Adolph Hitler,
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Moses, Jesus,
Christ, God, Trinity

St. John's Episcopal Church

61 Broad Street

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The Fourth Sunday in Lent (B)

March 18, 2012

DRAFT

“We are loved!”

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

John 3:14-21

Dear Lord, Please give us that life that never ends, and we will be joyful. Amen.

An internet banner reads, “There are no shortcuts to God’s plan for you.”

The monologue we hear from Jesus speaking to the Pharisee Nicodemus was to realign his looking for some quick fix, some shorthand insight to gain this new knowledge Jesus had. Nicodemus, the teacher, wanted learning from the student, Jesus. Nicodemus wanted a shortcut to eternal life. But what he

heard instead is that the way to that life was not something he could do or pray or even say. Nicodemus needed the Holy Spirit to come upon him and save him from a life of knowledge without learning. Nicodemus needed to be aware that God was the one who could blow the wind of life in his direction; and indeed Nicodemus was standing directly in Jesus' presence, looking for the wind when the tornado was just about to touch him.

What Nicodemus and we here need today is for Jesus raise us up. We want

to hear his voice calling us to come follow him.

William Willimon, a Methodist bishop in northern Alabama, wrote years ago, “Go ahead admit it, preacher. You love it. Lent is your favorite season of the church year. Children love Christmas, missionaries love Epiphany, charismatics dote on Pentecost -- but for preachers, nothing beats Lent. Here is the homiletical season par excellence, six weeks when we are given license to do what we would do all year if we could: breast-

beating, belittling, berating. It's a time of sackcloth and ashes, the long fast, self-denial, focus upon sin and its consequences. Every preacher gets to play the prophet at Lent. And the beautiful part is, the people love it. 'You are the overaggressive ones whose culpability made the cross inevitable,' we preach. 'All like sheep have gone astray,' we cry, and the people in unison say, 'You really stepped on our toes today, preacher. What a wonderful Lenten litany.' But, Bishop Willimon

continued, ‘the prophet is sent not to scold but to save.’”

Bishop Willimon was saying that Jesus was in the saving business. Jesus was not seeking glory for himself, but eternal life for others, no matter how notorious or public their sins. Jesus came to save. Indeed, his very name means, ‘one who saves’.

The season of Lent calls us back to the basics. We have wandered far and wide since the last Lent, and now we need to reset our compasses, realign our soul’s GPS system, our God Positioning

System, with God's holy satellite, God's Beloved Son Jesus Christ. Where have we strayed? What have we done that we shouldn't have done, and what have we not done that we should have done?

The lesson we just heard from the Book of Numbers speaks of a bronze serpent on a pole that would subdue the poisonous snakes that were killing the people. This pole prefigures the figure of Christ on the cross, our Crucifix we have placed up here just behind our altar. As we keep our gaze on the One who triumphed by suffering and dying

for us, we can avoid our gaze towards the sins the world is calling us to, which would cause our death. The little evils all around us are outshined by the big evil that humankind caused God's Son to go through by crucifying him. But that biggest evil humanity has ever done, indeed, by the grace of God, our biggest evil has worked out the pathway for all of us to find God in our lives, not as a distant and imagined being, but as a personal God who gave himself for our eternal salvation, our life that we will live with God forever—the eternal life

we have should we put our gaze, our hope, our faith on the One who stilled the waters and who even today stills our hearts that are pulled and pushed and turned against our Creator and God's Creatures and God's Creation. By gazing on Christ's sacrifice, we can find new hope, new courage, new strength to live the lives the Creator meant for us to live, in abundance, in family with the Holy Family, in accord with the infinite love God had for all humankind even before we were made.

Our Psalm 107 for today says, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, and his mercy endures forever.” It is not for our own strength and perseverance and saintliness that we have been saved; no, it is because of our evilness, and waywardness, and insurmountable sins that plague and tear at us each day that we needed to be saved. Only God would have the mercy to endure us, to turn us to look away from the snakes about us and to look again on the Cross that Saves Us.

The writer of our Epistle for today (Ephesians 2) notes that, “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.” Those serpents which were killing all others around us were ready to kill us too. But

God stepped into our lives, interdicted the serpents, stopped their poisonous bite, defanged them in front of our eyes, and God substituted for us our gaze on the Cross with his Son hung on it to save us from the evil of the world.

Yet God didn't just save us "from something," God saved us "to something." We have by our baptisms become those who are carrying out the dictates of God's Kingdom in which the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given a drink of water, the naked are clothed, the stranger is welcomed, the sick and

the prisoners are visited. We have been reborn into a world unlike any other where those who can do nothing for us are the ones we are particularly called to do some good deeds for. And the reward we get is amazing: they pray for us, they pray for us! And who does not covet the prayers of others? Who among us cannot use a prayer at least now and then? And if we are in need of more prayers, we get those prayers by serving the last, the least, and the lost. It is a guarantee of success in God's Kingdom.

There is a very subtle word play going on in the Greek text of today's Gospel. What we have memorized perhaps as children is that we need to "believe in" Jesus; but actually what the Greek text seems to say pointedly several times is that we need to "believe into" Jesus, "believe into" Jesus the Christ. Our good deeds are seen as being done "in" God's Name—the writer uses a different word for "in" than for "into" in this text---but our believing, our heartfelt yearning, should be to dwell with Christ and enter "into"

the holy realm of our Savior. Just approaching and scratching the surface of Christ's will for us is not enough; we need to be more than superficial Christians; we need to be encapsulated, engulfed, injected "into" the life of Christ as the followers of the Only True God.

Then the Gospel writer turns to the comparison of light and dark, saying that if we are evil, we choose to stay in the dark, away from even the gaze of other humans. But if we are God's children we will seek the Light of

Christ, God's Holy Light. When we move into God's truth, we come into Christ's Light, the Light that shows our deeds are done for God and not against God, not for ourselves, but for others. The transition from darkness to light may cause our spiritual eyes to blink until we adjust to the brightness of life we have in Christ.

In my former life as a scientist I was trained as a spectroscopist, a person who examines the behavior of materials by the way they bend or 'polarize' light. I could tell, for instance, whether a

solution of an enzyme was fresh or degraded just by the way it would bend light or behave in polarized light. If a certain spectral peak was high, that meant the enzyme was fresh and useful; if the peak were muted or non-existent, then the enzyme was useless. So light was the way we could tell if a biological preparation was useful or not. Indeed we were using rather sophisticated light measurements, ones which a trace of a fingerprint or the most minute twist of a tiny glass lens would throw off our measurements entirely. We could

discover the presence of a fingerprint that would be probably impossible to weigh, and that would require us completely cleaning every glass object until every trace of fingerprints or any other smudge was removed. It was a painstaking operation, but a protocol that was absolutely necessary in our work. We were working at a level of atoms and molecules, and we could detect twists and turns of the most miniscule size in a biological molecule. A missing twist or turn would entirely change the activity of a protein or a

polynucleic acid, the essential building blocks of our cells. There could be no compromise with allowing in the full spectrum of light with all of its characteristics into our work.

In the same way, our lives in Christ need to be continually examined and cleansed, otherwise our intentions will be less than pure, and our results could be less than life-giving. But God understands all of that, and as the Psalmist said, ‘God’s mercy endures forever.’ Yet as God’s servants we need to respect God’s guidance in our lives

and in the lives of others. We need to point people to the Bread of Life, the Author of our Salvation, the Branch of Jesse, the Giver of Life Eternal. Any other way is the way of darkness. Let us come to Christ's pure light today so we can point others to the way that gives Life Eternal.

Amen.