

March 14, 2021
John 3:14-21

Lent 4
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“Restoration, Not Condemnation”

“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.”

Most people assumed it was an ominous sign when construction vehicles pulled up in front of the Old Mill Inn. The Inn had been an institution in the community for generations, the finest restaurant in the area where people celebrated special occasions, enjoyed the finest dining available, and gathered for luncheons after a funeral service. But after many years of great success, the Inn fell on hard times and after numerous changes in ownership closed. The building fell into disrepair and became an eyesore in the community. Most people believed that it was inevitable that someone would buy the valuable property and tear down the old building so that a new structure might rise on that site. The vehicles that appeared in front of the old building appeared to be a sign that the process of condemnation of the Old Mill Inn had begun.

But on closer inspection, it became clear that those trucks and their occupants did not intend on condemning the building that held so many memories. The trucks were from a company that specialized in the restoration of historic buildings; it turned out that the person who bought the Old Mill Inn was a lover of historic structures and the repurposing of older buildings for new uses. That day was the beginning of the restoration and transformation of the Inn which would become a medical office building, serving a new generation of residents as the restaurant had served their forebears as an important part of the community.

There are occasions when there is no choice but to condemn something that has passed the point of no return in its usefulness. Many buildings fall into such a state of disrepair that it is not practical to attempt to restore them, even when they have historical significance. Some old cars may have served their owners for years, but when the cost of repairs becomes too great it may be the time to search for a new vehicle. A refrigerator or stove may have served us for many years, but there comes a time when keeping these old appliances in repair is not cost-effective and trading them for new items becomes the wise choice. But there are also times when condemnation is not necessary, when something that has fallen into disrepair or

appears to be beyond hope can be restored and transformed into something new, repurposed so that it might serve a new generation. While it is often easier to condemn and build anew, the rewards of restoration and repurposing can far outweigh something that is built anew to replace what has been condemned.

Today's Gospel lesson contains what may be the most familiar and beloved of verses in the entire Bible: "*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.*" (John 3:16). This verse, which has been called "the Gospel in miniature," has been memorized by generations of Sunday school students, hung in framed pictures on the walls of family homes, and even finds its way into sports stadiums. But as is true with all biblical verses, it is important to look at these familiar words in their original context so that we might understand their full meaning in this section of John's Gospel. The words of this beloved verse reiterate the salvific dimensions of Jesus' death as described in the previous verses while moving the argument forward with reference to God's love. They proclaim that God gave Jesus to the world because God loves the world:

- "God's love has breadth. It is a big love; it's a broad love ... God's love is too big to be limited to a particular race. It is too big to be wrapped in a particularistic garment. It is too great to be encompassed by any single nation. God is a universal God." – Martin Luther King, Jr.

Today's Gospel lesson begins with a strange reference to an incident that is described in today's First Lesson, where the Lord sends poisonous serpents among the people in response to their grumbling that "*there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food*" (Numbers 21:5). When many of the Israelites die from the snakebites, the people come to Moses and confess that "*we have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take the serpents from us.*" (21:7). After Moses prays on behalf of the people, the Lord commands him to "*make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live*" (21:8). Moses makes a serpent of bronze and puts it on a pole; "*and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live*" (21:9). To experience healing, the Israelites needed to look to the serpent raised above them; "*that is, they must see the image of their sin and acknowledge their wrongdoing in order to accept God's gift of life.*" (Alicia D. Myers). John refers to this image in describing the salvation that we experience through the lifting up of Christ on the Cross: "*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.*" (3:14-15). When we look upon the Cross, we remember our own sinfulness as well

as the source of our salvation in the one who suffered and died so that we may believe that Christ *“has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.”* (Small Catechism). When we *“survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride.”* (ELW Hymn 803).

It is in this context that we hear those familiar and beloved words of John 3:16, which speak of God’s love for the “world” (*kosmos*), which in John refers most often to human beings who are at odds with Jesus and with God:

- “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.” – 1:10.
- “The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil.” – 7:7.
- “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you.” – 15:18-19.

God’s love is so great because it is a love directed not only toward those who love God but to those who reject and despise God. It is that “love” (*agape*) that is distinctive from human forms of love (*eros, philia*) because it is a love that *“bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things”* (1 Corinthians 13:7), a love that is experienced in the Cross because *“God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8). God’s love for the world is so great that *“he gave his only Son”*; “give” (*didomi*) is used in the Fourth Gospel to describe God as the source of what Jesus offers to the world:

- “The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands.” – 3:35.
- “The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father.” – 5:22-23.

This is the only place in the Fourth Gospel, however, that says that God “gave” his Son to the world; the more common expression is that God “sent” Jesus. To “send” Jesus is more clearly associated with God’s will for the world, whereas “gave” is used to underscore that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ derives from God’s love for the world as well as from God’s Will. God’s gift of Jesus, which culminates in Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, decisively alters the options available to the world; God gave his only Son *“so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may*

have eternal life.” If one believes, one’s present is altered by the gift of eternal life; if one does not believe, one perishes.

As popular and beloved as are the words of John 3:16, one needs to continue reading so that we might understand that *“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”* (3:17). As condemnation would have doomed the fate of the Old Mill Inn, a declaration of condemnation would have meant the destruction of humanity because of its sinfulness. But as God proved God’s love for us in sending God’s only Son while we were still sinners, alienated and hostile to God, God sent his only Son not for the purpose of condemning the world, but instead for saving and restoring the world so that God might restore what had been broken by sinfulness and rebellion.

- “Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace” – Ephesians 2:12-15.

Christ’s mission is one of restoration, not condemnation: *“there is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Romans 8:1). The “condemnation” of which Paul speaks is the final judgment that God, the righteous judge, will mete out at the last. It is the necessary reaction *“of the justice-loving God to all injustice, of the God who created image-bearing human beings to all that defaces and destroys that likeness”* (N.T. Wright). Sin’s condemnation has now been affected in the Cross of God’s Son: *“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”* (8:3-4). Those who are “in Christ” know that the condemnation that must rightly fall on sin has nothing more to do with them.

- “There are laws enough in the world, more than people can keep ... But the Lord Christ says, ‘I have not come to judge, to bite, to grumble, and to condemn people. The world is too much condemned. Therefore I will not rule people with laws. I have come that through my ministry and my death I may

give help to all who are lost and may release and set free those who are overburdened with laws, with judgments, and with condemnation.” – Martin Luther.

God sends the Son into the world to save the world, not condemn it. Yet the very presence of Jesus as the Incarnate Word in the world confronts the world with a decision, to believe or not to believe, and making that decision is a moment of judgment: *“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”* (3:18). The gift of God’s only Son is once that can either be accepted or rejected; Jesus is the one who is *“standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in with you and eat with you, and you with me”* (Revelation 3:20). If one believes in the good news of Jesus Christ, one is saved; if one rejects the gift of God and does not believe, one condemns oneself unwittingly. It is the judgment that has been experienced as *“the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil”* (3:19). To love darkness rather than light is the same as not believing, and it results in judgment. The way a person acts in the presence of the light is the defining mark of a person’s identity. *“God sent Jesus to save the world, but each person must decide whether to accept that offer of salvation.”* (Gail O’Day). Jesus is the “true light” who came into the world (*“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world”* – 1:9); he proclaims that *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”* (8:12). Jesus displays this light first in conversations and then in confrontations with individuals and crowds:

- “Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ you sin remains.’” – 9:39-41.

The call to “come to the light,” to turn away from the powers of darkness and walk as a child of the light, is the call of this season of renewal in which we hear the Word of God entreating us to *“return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”* (Joel 2:13). It is a call to repent of our former ways that drew us away from God, to turn back from paths that lead us away from God so that we might come into the presence of the one who promises that *“I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”*

(John 12:32). It is the good news that God awaits our return as the Loving Father longed for the return of his prodigal son and rejoice when the son came home; *“for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”* (Luke 15:24). It is the message of “amazing grace” that God so loved the world – the world that rejected God, the world that condemned God’s only Son to death – that he gave his Son not to condemn this rebellious, sin-filled world but in order that the world might be saved from all that would destroy us and draw us away from God. The mission of Christ was a mission of restoration, not condemnation, a mission of reconciliation that our Lord invites us to embrace in this Lenten time of reflection and renewal.

- “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” – 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

As the message and mission of Christ is restoration and not condemnation, our message and mission must also be one that seeks to restore what has been damaged, that seeks to build up what has been torn down, that seeks to bring together what has been divided. We must never look upon another person as a “lost cause,” or someone whose bad decisions have brought them past the point of no return; because God never gave up on humanity, neither should we give up on any other human being. As God so loved the world with all its flaws and imperfections, we also are called to look upon the world the same “grace-healed eyes” that sees a world in need of restoration, renewal, and reconciliation that are available to all of us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

- “Refusing to forgive is tantamount to re-crucifying Christ. Instead of seeing stones rolled away, we throw stones at each other. What so many people today fail to realize is that forgiveness is a door to peace and happiness. Forgiving is not ignoring wrongdoing, but overcoming the evil inside us and in our world with love. To forgive is not just a command of Christ but the key to reconciling all that is broken in our lives and relationships.” – Johann Christoph Arnold.

The mission of the workers who arrived at the Old Mill Inn was to restore the beloved property, not to condemn it; as a result, the building continued to serve the community for many generations. Our mission as the Church of Jesus Christ is to continue to shine the light of Christ before others, to share his message of restoration and reconciliation, to invite others into a relationship with Christ through which we experience the love of God and the peace of Christ which passes all understanding, the blessings of our Lord and Saviour and that will continue to keep us and guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our reconciling Lord.

Amen.