

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: John 3:14-21

¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “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.

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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ 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.”

A man told this story about his aunt. She died some time ago, having lived to be eighty or so. She had never married. While clearing out her possessions, relatives came across a battered photograph of a young man whom his aunt had loved. The relationship ended tragically. She never loved anyone else and kept for the remainder of her life a photograph of the man she had loved.

Why? As she aged, she knew that she would have difficulty believing that, at one point in her life, someone had once cared for her and regarded her as his everything. It could all have seemed like a dream, an illusion, something she had invented in her old age to console her in her declining years – except for the photo. The photo reminded her that she really had loved someone once and was loved in return. It was her sole link to a world in which she had been valued.

I want to begin by asking you this morning these important questions: What do you believe about yourself? What do you believe about God? What are those events or things that have influenced what you believe? In the story I just shared with you, we don't know why the woman had difficulty believing anyone could love and care for her again as her lost lover did. We do know that she seemed to be afraid to try again; and because of that fear, she never got involved in another romantic relationship. She seemed to be stuck in the past.

Earlier this week, I was reading my March 7 devotion from the devotional, “At His Feet”, which I know a few of you have purchased and are using also. This particular devotion, although not based on today's scripture reading, stirred my thoughts for this text. It's funny how that works sometimes.

The author, Chris Tiegreen, stirred my thoughts with these words: “We are told at nearly every turn that we are products of our past. Our biological makeup and much of our personalities result from genetic material of our ancestors. Our decisions, our flaws, and our preferences are the result of our childhood and our social environments. Everything we are, according to psychologists and geneticists, comes from a previous condition.”

Tiegreen goes on to say, “No, says Jesus. Our behavior today is based on our future. Our new nature has come from Him, we are being conformed to His likeness, and our deeds today are to be determined by the fact that He is coming again. We are products of a coming kingdom, not a conditioning past.”

He ends, saying, “Let your future guide your present. Remember who you are in Christ. Remember who he promises you will be for all eternity. Don’t let the past define you.” Tiegreen’s focus for this devotion is challenging us to be ready for Christ’s return. I on the other hand, felt led to think about what we believe, about ourselves, about God. What influences and shapes who we are? Is it our past or the promises of God? What we believe gives our lives direction and meaning.

Today’s text is a portion of scripture from the story of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who one evening came to Jesus to talk theology. Jesus brought up the need for people to be born again. Nicodemus did not understand how one could be born again. As a teacher, Nicodemus had thorough knowledge of the Old Testament, however, he didn’t understand what it said about the Messiah and salvation. In essence, Nicodemus was stuck in the past. What he taught was knowledge of the past; therefore, many Jews who followed his teachings were stuck in the past, too.

Our text this morning begins with a strange story from Jewish history. It’s a story the people in Jesus’ day were very familiar with. We need to turn all the way back to the book of Numbers to find the story Jesus was using. The story takes place after the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt. Moses was leading them as they wandered in the wilderness. We read the following story in Numbers 21:4-9:

“From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom, but the people became discouraged on the way. 5 The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” 6 Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.’ So, Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ 9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.”

Jesus telling this story from the past was using it as a parable, a lesson for focus and direction in our lives. The story is not about an idol that when gazed upon, would bring healing; although for some, the brazen serpent became an idol for worship and had to be destroyed.

The people in Moses’ day were not healed by an idol, God healed the people. The bronze serpent was a symbol, to redirect the focus of the people, to turn their thoughts to God. That’s when they were healed. Similarly, Jesus said then in John 14: “so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

There’s that word, “believe”. Just as the people in Moses’ day needed to believe that God, not the bronze snake, would heal them from the snake’s bite; we need to believe in Jesus. Believe, what does it mean to believe; and what are we to believe? To believe, first of all, involves more than simply possessing knowledge. If we move on in our scripture reading today, I think we learn what it means to believe.

Verse sixteen begins with those familiar words: “God so loved the world,” Belief involves trusting that God loves us. God loves us so much that he would go to the greatest extreme to show us his love and save us from eternal life of misery and sin. God did just that by sending us His only Son. The question we need to ask ourselves then, is do we believe God loves us. If we don’t, how then can we say we believe in God?

March 10, 2024 – If I Believe

Holding on to the negative things in our past and allowing those experiences to shape how we see ourselves and how we live our lives, certainly is not a reflection of our belief that God loves us. Those negative things that happened to us, those horrible degrading things that people said to or about us, those mistakes we may have made, do not define us as unlovable. They do not define who we are to God and who God created us to be. We are God's children and God loves us.

In fact, Jesus said God loves the world, not just us, but the world! That encompasses a whole lot of people, everyone, in fact. Red, yellow, black and white; rich and poor, gay, bisexual, transgender and straight; Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Church of the Brethren, all faiths and denominations; young or old, God so loves the world! Imagine how it would change the world if we all believed that! Selflessness would replace selfishness, respect would replace disregard, peace would replace war, mutuality would replace greed; forgiveness would replace grudges and revenge. The list of changes would be great, and the world would be a much better place. Furthermore, if we do not believe God loves the world, our lives will not reflect God's love so that all will know God loves them.

Prior to Jesus' arrival, many of those who were God worshippers, believed him to be one who ruled over them with demands and condemnation. Although we read in the Old Testament how God was clearly engaged with individuals, most people did not understand God's desire to be in a personal relationship with them. So, they sought to be obedient to the rules of God without seeing how the rules, meant to distance them from sin, would make God more known to them personally. Then when bad things happened, the only thing imaginable to them was that God's wrath was upon them. But was that, is that God's goal.

Jesus clearly says it is not! God sent him into the world to prove that point. That leads us to another question we need to ask ourselves and that is, do we believe Jesus is the Son of God. Do we believe that he was sent to teach us about God's love, to show us God's love through acts of service and engagement, to die for our salvation. Do we believe God forgives us of our sins upon our confession? If we believe, we will forgive ourselves, we will focus on Jesus, learn his teachings, welcome the gift of forgiveness and salvation, and be changed.

The reality is that we condemn ourselves to a life of sin and lostness from God's love if Jesus simply becomes to us nothing more than like that bronze serpent from the days of Moses, which in time, became a mere idol. There certainly are people too willing to deny themselves of God's love and saving grace because they hold on to feelings of guilt or victimization; or they are too proud and self-reliant, believing that they need no one's help, let alone help from a God they can't see. For these in denial, bouncing from one quick fix to another is their lot in life. Apparently, they love living in the darkness. They live like the man who said, "I have a very fine doctor. If you can't afford the operation, he touches up the X-rays." God doesn't do that.

God doesn't desire this kind of eternity for us. And it could be an eternity, beginning in this lifetime and carrying over into the lifetime yet to come. The opposite is true for us who believe to the depths of which I speak, we will then know the joy of everlasting life beginning now, in this lifetime and the lifetime yet to come.

This is not a promise that we will never endure suffering and tragedy, but we will always have hope and courage to face those difficult and trying times, because God loves us and will help us persevere until a better day comes, and it will come.

This brings me back to these questions: What do you believe? What do you believe about yourself? Do you believe you are lovable? What do you believe about God?

March 10, 2024 – If I Believe

A Nike commercial didn't say a word. It simply showed a series of people with one thing in common: a nasty injury or scar. There was a cowboy with a huge scar around his eye, a fellow with a bulging cauliflower ear, and another man with horribly callused feet. There was no explanation – simply the Nike logo and “Just Do It.”

The ad was criticized as being incomprehensible and extreme. But the key to the commercial was the background music. Joe Cocker sings “You are so beautiful, to me.”

To the wrestler with the misshapen ear, the surfer with a shark bite, the bull rider blind in one eye, injuries are beauty marks. And to their fans, these athletes are beautiful because of their scars. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” says Mike Folino, the ad's creator.

God's love and grace is just as jarring. Our beauty is found not in us, but in the one who looks down at us – injured, blind and scarred – and sings, “You are so beautiful, to me.”

Likewise, the words we read in John 3:16 are words telling each of us and the world that, we are so beautiful, to God. Say it with me and believe; “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever, believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” Say these words to yourself whenever you need them to assure you, and then, believe them to be true. Amen.