



***Sermon by the Right Reverend John Stephens***

***Episcopal Visit to St. Helen, West Point Grey, Lent IV, March 14, 2021***

***Readings: Numbers 21: 4-9; John 3: 14-21***

It is so good to be able to be here in this beautiful church of St. Helen's. I am so sorry that we cannot gather in person but I do hope that you are keeping safe. St. Helen's has had a rich ministry over many years, the connection and participation in the Neighbourhood Ministry and Refugee Ministry is truly inspiring as you continue to connect with neighbours all around. But there are so many other areas of ministry that St. Helen's has been involved with that have been transformational to many. I am grateful for

the ministry of your former Rector, Scott, and now as you are in a time of interim, I am delighted that The Reverend Liz Hamel invited me to join with you for your online worship. It is great to be with you.

Embedded in the gospel passage you just heard was the famous quotation that gets referred to in a vast number of places, including billboards, shopping bags and on that eye black ink that athletes put on to help reduce the glare on a sunny day. It is seen as an evangelical tool all on its own, in that, it seems, one just has to read John 3:16 and your life will be transformed and changed. “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Martin Luther, that famous Church reformer, is quoted as saying that these 27 words are “the heart of the Bible, the Gospel in miniature.” If they are the gospel in a nutshell, perhaps there is not much else to say and I could end this sermon now... but since I am here let me offer a few words.

So let’s sit with John 3:16 for a little while and let the words roll around this building and in your home and get caught up in your thinking and praying on this day. Let’s see how they might poke us and prod us here in Lent, in 2021, even during this pandemic, and how they might nudge us to look more

deeply at how we live this day and this week. Let's break it down into smaller pieces for easier consumption.

For God... The first two words that set a beautiful scene and the groundwork for all else. God is the subject of the sentence and therefore is at the centre, not us, not the many things that fill our days and our time but God. God is the ground that we walk upon in this life, the basis of all else, the alpha and the omega, and shapes all that we experience in life. We can get this muddled up sometimes and think that life is all about us and what we can accomplish and gather and control. But life is a gift. Life is a gift from the God who called us into existence. How do we live as if we are grateful? How do we show our trust and hope in God? How do we act when we know that all of life is a gift to be received rather than taken?

Henri Nouwen once wrote: "Introspection and contemplative prayer is the ancient discipline by which we begin to see God in our heart. Interior prayer is a careful attentiveness to the One who dwells in the center of our being. Through prayer we awaken ourselves to God within us. With practice, we allow God to enter into our heartbeat and our breathing, into our thoughts and emotions, into our hearing, seeing, touching, and tasting, and into every

membrane of our body. It is by being awake to God in us that we can increasingly see God in the world around us." <sup>1</sup>

For God so loved... The first four words of this passage paint a picture that stirs us to see that there is something to this God, this giver of all gifts and it is centred upon that word love that is often misunderstood and confused, even abused, but love refers to that thing that binds all of life together. That piece that comes to us from the source of all life and flows through us to make us aware of beauty and wonder and joy. It is that gift that changes us from merely life forms to human beings aware of others and able to offer compassion, hope and the whole of ourselves to others. It is a life changing force that touches us beyond our intellect and strength to our heart and soul. The part of us that encounters holiness in even the most mundane moments and awakens us to cherish them.

For God so loved... is the basis of our whole theology that Jesus revealed to us. God is love, God will love, God so loved. Jesus revealed a God that wants, desires, pleads, begs us to be in relationship. A God for whom love is a link, a prayer for us and with us and commits to be with us and amongst for always. A God of a covenant of love to the thousandth generation.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Spiritual Direction* by Henri Nouwen

Henri Nouwen wrote: But what I would like to say is that the spiritual life is a life in which you gradually learn to listen to a voice that says something else, that says, "You are the beloved and on you my favour rests."... I want you to hear that voice. It is not a very loud voice because it is an intimate voice. It comes from a very deep place. It is soft and gentle. I want you to gradually hear that voice. We both have to hear that voice and to claim for ourselves that that voice speaks the truth, our truth. It tells us who we are."

For God so loved the world... The translation of this that I prefer is For God so loved the cosmos... God's love is so expansive it goes far beyond simply our own individual lives and beyond our church and beyond the city around us. It is spacious beyond what we could ever imagine. It goes beyond our world, beyond our lifetime, beyond our thinking and understanding. God's love is as expansive as the stars we see on a clear summer's eve but again far beyond that. We know that the universe continues to evolve and grow and expand. We have seen pictures and images of only a small corner of the universe but it is infinite in size; beyond measure or definition. This is the image of God's love that is helpful for me. Not limited by our pettiness, our guilt, our unbelief, our unwillingness to forgive ourselves or others or see the

presence of God in another. None of that, For God so loved the cosmos is the kind of nutshell our gospel tries to fit into.

“For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son,...” This God of the cosmos, this God of love, this God who was present at the beginning of time and before that and continues to walk with us and connect with our lives, this God gave a Son. This God became vulnerable. This God broke the bounds of generosity and came to us. This God proclaimed that a connection could be made with humanity. This God, beyond our full understanding, entered a human form to reveal a depth to the love that God has for us. Risking all to enter time, to enter finiteness, to enter all that it means to be human so that God is no longer distant from our lives but walking amongst us knowing and feeling all that we know and feel.

This Son, this Jesus, revealed to us the very heart of God. Breaking into all of our rules and misgivings and wisdom and entering time to see that God has a compassion and grace that is bigger than any limits we might put upon it. This Jesus spoke about a God who is like a parent of a prodigal child who will simply not give up on us. Or like a mother hen with a brood of chicks. A God who is calling us to respond to the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. A God who invites us to not simply take all that we can get away with but to be salt and light in this

world, sell our possessions and give to the poor, even love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Jesus revealed, as God's Word, God's Son, God who could still a storm but also accept water from a woman of Samaria. A God who was breaking down barriers and human-made divisions and called us into living a more compassionate life not centred on ourselves but God, not centred on possessions but love, not centred on ego but faith in God's grace for us and others.

This God so loved the cosmos that God gave God's only Son. Gave God's child to be treated in this world in the cruelest of ways. To be beaten and mocked and tortured and killed. To attempt to take away every ounce of his humanity and compassion. To try to destroy him and all that he stood for. To erase his presence from the world, from the cosmos. But it couldn't happen, it was not possible. Instead the actions created a central part of our gospel nutshell. It could not and did not end in death, not in perishing but life, greater life, abundant life, ...eternal life.

Henri Nouwen once said: "The truth,... is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity and held safe in an everlasting embrace... We must dare to opt consciously for our chosenness and not allow our emotions, feelings, or passions to seduce us into self-rejection."

“For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

In Lent, in a pandemic, this is our faith, our gospel in a nutshell.