

A Sign by the Side of the Road

John 3:14-21

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My wife, Brenda, and I were driving through the mountains of Colorado. We made our way carefully along a narrow, winding road—you know, the kind of mountain road that drops off a couple thousand feet. As I navigated the car, Brenda offered several “constructive” comments to the effect that I better keep my eyes *on* the road and *off* the scenery. She was right, of course, but it was hard not to look at the spectacular views. One particular rock formation caught my attention. There was a sign painted in large white letters: “Prepare to meet thy God—read John 3:16!” Fortunately, I already knew John 3:16. But I shuddered at the thought of some poor motorists madly grabbing their cell phones and trying to find the Gospel of John when they should have been watching the road.

Right after the painted rocks, we came upon a hairpin curve. It took us to the very edge of a jagged cliff before winding its way around the mountain. I’m pretty sure the sign was put there knowing that we would come upon that cliff. *Prepare to meet thy God*—because who knows what’s coming next. Perhaps around the next curve your tire will blow or a huge boulder will come crashing down the mountain. And in the blink of an eye, you will come face to face with Almighty God.

I’m guessing that most of you know John 3:16. Say it with me: *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.* So what are we to make of this verse? Particularly, what are we to make of its claim of extravagant love during this somber season of Lent? I mean, we’ve got purple—the color of repentance—on the altar. We do a mournful confession each week: *Lord, I’m caught in the snares of sin and cannot break free!* We’ve removed all the alleluias from our singing and switched to minor keys. We say that Lent is a time to fall on our knees and say we’re sorry. Lent is, in other words, the church’s equivalent to the painted rock on the hairpin curve: *Prepare to meet thy God!* So, here’s the question: what’s a downright cheerful John 3:16 doing in the middle of all our Lenten remorse?

Friends, I want to let you in on a little secret: Lent is a favorite season for us preachers. We look forward to it because we have six whole Sundays when we’re given license to do what we’d do all year long if we could—breast beating, belittling, berating. It’s the season of sackcloth and ashes. Mardi Gras is over and we’re

facing 40 demanding days in the wilderness. During Lent every preacher gets to play the prophet. And we love it!

And the amazing thing is, the congregation seems to love it too. “All we like sheep have gone astray,” cries the preacher. “You’re the ones who nailed him to that tree!” And the congregation responds with an enthusiastic, “Amen! You really stepped on our toes today, preacher!”

What is it about us that sometimes responds better to scolding than to affirmation? Why does the sweet declaration, *God so loved the world*, not seem to have near the effect upon us as the stern warning, *Prepare to meet thy God!* Is it because we often feel guilty and not very lovable? Are we afraid that God might be out to “get” us? I’m not sure, but for whatever reason, it sets us up for some good, old-fashioned Lenten groveling.

And yet, on the Fourth Sunday of Lent—today—things are meant to be different. As the church makes its weary way toward the cross, there is a pause in this procession of pulpit-pounding preachers. This Sunday is called “Mid-Lent,” or, as it once was known, “Refreshment Sunday.” Traditionally this day has been a respite from the rigors of self-denial. It’s been a time for cookies and sweet cakes, a break in the severe Lenten fast. Folks, do you hear what I’m saying? You better get to the Social Hall after church for coffee and treats. Bryce Winstead has prepared some tasty delicacies for your refreshment.

In the gloomy march toward Calvary, we hear hopeful news: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....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.* It’s as if John were saying: “The cross is not about blame, but about love. God is not a high and holy God wanting to squash some poor soul under foot, but rather a compassionate God wanting to wrap arms of love around you and call you “child.”

Richard Foster tells a story that gives us a glimpse into the heart of God. The story is about a friend of his who was walking through a shopping mall with his two-year-old son. The son was in a particularly fussy mood. The frustrated father tried everything to quiet him, including scolding, but nothing seemed to work. Then the father got an idea. He scooped up his son, held him close to his chest, and began singing an impromptu love song. None of the words rhymed. He sang off key. And yet, as best he could, this father began sharing his heart. “I love you,” he sang. “I’m so glad you’re my boy. I like the way you laugh.” On they went from one store to the next. The two-year-old gradually quieted down, listening to this strange and wonderful

song. Finally, they finished shopping and went to the car. As the father opened the door and prepared to buckle in his son, the child lifted his head and said simply, "Sing it to me again, Daddy! Sing it to me again!"

John 3:16 is a love song. The Father is singing it to us. In the midst of our season of scolding, John reminds us of why we're here. We're on the way, not so much because of bad things we've done or good things we've left undone, but because of what *God* has done. Look at the cross, says John 3:16, see how much God loves you. It was out of love that Jesus came, and lived, and died. Love. "Yes," says the church at mid-Lent, "now we remember. It was for this that we began the Lenten journey. It wasn't for sackcloth and ashes. It was love that put us in this parade. We kneel before the Crucified Christ, brought to our knees by the sheer wonder of God's amazing grace."

The cross is heavy, though, and the clouds soon begin to gather again. And we shall have more days for honesty, more Sundays to examine our lives and admit our shortcomings. Lent is only half over, after all. There is still more breast beating to be done. It doesn't take much of a preacher to point out your sins. You already know most of them. But what you may not be aware of—or have a hard time remembering—is that Christ urges you on toward Calvary, not to condemn you, but to save you. His heart is big enough and his love wide enough to make a way for us when there is no other way.

Whether we know it or not, we desperately need this love. Everybody does. There's an organization in Chicago called Emmaus Ministries. The group reaches out to young men in their teens and twenties who are living on the streets. These young men come to Chicago looking for opportunity. But often they wind up getting trapped in drug abuse and, to support their habit, they end up selling drugs or working as male prostitutes. People from Emmaus walk the streets of Chicago from 10:00 at night till 3:00 in the morning. They are there to offer a lifeline. Every once in a while someone feeling trapped and hopeless will say to them, "I can't take it anymore. Is there a way out of this hell?" And then someone from Emmaus will step forward, offer them shelter, and the beginning of hope.

A young man named Joseph was looking for a way out. He was befriended by John from Emmaus. One evening Joseph was sitting in John's living room. John's wife was setting the table. Members of the group were preparing the meal. They invited Joseph to have dinner with them. Joseph whispered to John as he sat down, "I've never done this before." John was confused, "Done what?" "This family dinner thing around a table. I've never done this."

Joseph was typical of the young men in his world. He didn't know his father. His mother was a crack addict. He was removed from his home when he was four months old, and then was shuttled from one group home to another. He was in a gang by age 11 and in prison by age 16. Now he was in his mid-twenties and never once had he sat down to eat a meal around a table with a real family. Never once had he been around people who cared for each other as they passed the food and talked about their day.

After dinner that night, John and others from Emmaus started the hard work of helping Joseph. The fact of the matter is, they could have started with: "Joseph, you've made a mess of your life. You should be ashamed!" And, who knows, he might have responded well to the scolding—some people do. But the Emmaus folks take a different tact. Instead of starting with shame, they start with something much harder to swallow: "Joseph, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Joseph, you are loved by God more than you could possibly know." It took Joseph a long time to believe those words, but eventually he did, and slowly his life began to change.

Friends, isn't that the same love you and I are searching for...especially during the season of Lent. The crudely lettered sign issues a warning: "Prepare to meet thy God." We tremble at the thought of standing before Almighty God whom we've betrayed in thought, word, and deed. Then at the cross we finally meet God. And God says, "Don't be afraid. I sent my Son into the world, not to condemn you, but to save you."

We're halfway through our 40 days. On this Refreshment Sunday, have some cookies and sweet cakes. Be glad. Remember John 3:16. That's how much God loves you. Amen