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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 10, 2024
John 3:14-21
That Golden Verse

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On Wednesdays evenings, for the Midweek Liturgy here at Immanuel, I am preaching my way through the Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew. It is slow-going, which is what I enjoy. As I get older, I seem to treasure the Bible more and more. Sometimes a single paragraph so moves me that I can hardly go on, but feel I must stop and preach about it. Sometimes a single verse of scripture does that to me. And sometimes just a word or two captures my heart and makes me want to preach.

So it is with today's Gospel Lesson. A word or two is enough for me. In fact, these few words on my heart are so rich that I bet I will only begin to touch on them in this sermon. So I am referring to the golden verse, John 3:16. Sometimes, when you are watching football on t.v., you can see people holding up a sign saying simply "John 3:16." [Hold up my John 3:16 sign.] It is a verse well worth lifting up.

I have used the King James Version in today's liturgy. The multiplication of modern translations of the Bible is no doubt good in many ways. Still, I grieve some about the loss of a common text — a translation of the Bible that many people across the land know by heart. I think many of us know John 3:16 by heart. In the King James Version, it goes this way:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16, KJV)

Three words are enough for me in this verse: "God," "loved," and "world." God so loved the world! Look! You and I qualify for God's love: We are part of this world! Let me build my sermon around these three words of Holy Scripture.

First, let us consider the word "God." We are speaking of the Triune God, our Maker. Let us think no small thoughts when it comes to our God. Our God could have been alone. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had no need of creation. Their divine communion could have been rich enough for them forever. And yet, they chose not to be alone. They chose that there should be our universe and us — you and me. We are a mixed bag. Humanity as a whole is a very mixed bag. But our God would not be without us. Wonder of wonders! What is this I am claiming? I am claiming that there is within the mighty heart of our God a desire — a kind of yearning — for the likes of you and me. What a

world of trouble our human race has thrown up for our Maker through the many centuries we have lived on this earth. But also, we humans have offered up a lot of good, and it seems that for the sake of a faithful human life, our Maker is willing that we should exist.

And there is a great divine agreement in this. All three persons of the Holy Trinity agree on this. God the Father created and sustains the world, moment by moment. He says, "Let the heavens be!" and so they are. He says "Let the people of this congregation and this preacher be!" and so we are. If he did not sustain us continually, we would vanish. But such as we are, God the Father keeps us alive. He creates and sustains us.

God the Holy Spirit is working on us to make us more holy. He is speaking to our hearts continually. I hope he is speaking even through this sermon and today's hymns and liturgy. As the Christmas hymn "Away in a Manger" puts it, God the Holy Spirit "fits us for heaven, to live with you there."

Not only that, the Holy Spirit is continually fighting against the problems we human beings throw up — problems for the environment, problems between nations, problems between persons. The Holy Spirit is dragging our world toward something very good: the Kingdom of God. The Spirit is always hard at working overcoming our mistakes and sins, turning things around toward the Kingdom. His weapons are few. He chooses as his instruments God's holy word and sacraments, the church and our fellowship, and the holy lives you and I can offer in this world. We should do what we can to fit ourselves for that Kingdom.

And God the Son holds things together. He fashions a connection between the hope that all three persons of the Holy Trinity had at the beginning and the Kingdom of God toward which the world is trending. But a price had to be paid. The devil and our sin so spoil things that there must be a reckoning. There must be some way forward that our Maker does not grieve that he even made us in the first place. There must be some way forward that our Maker does not simply shut down this whole enterprise. God the Son pays that price. He became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, he suffered under Pontius Pilate, he died and he rose victorious. He is the Savior. He is the Redeemer. He is the Intercessor. He is the One who shields us. He is the One God the Father and God the Holy Spirit can look at and be proud of humanity.

So, that is my first word, "God!" God so loved the world.

Next, let us consider "the world" God so loved the *world*. It is a world with a lot of beauty in it — both physical and moral. I bet our Triune God is glad to see the beauty of our world. A few weeks ago, Pastor Lara took the boys to the see the Grand Canyon. I bet that was beautiful. I grew up on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. I have seen sunrises and sunsets on the old Choptank River. To me, that was beautiful. Carol and I have been to Rome, Florence, and Venice. The art and the architecture of those towns are thrilling. I imagine God himself admires these things too.

I have been speaking of the physical beauty of our world. But think too of the moral beauty in our world. There are mothers and fathers across the land who work and pray for their families. There are middle-aged children who work and pray for their elderly parents. They are people of integrity. They get up in the morning, eat their oatmeal, and work their way through the day — sometimes for low wages doing hard work. But they are honest workers, they love their families, and people who know them are glad for them. So is our God. It is part of the reason He still loves our world.

There are still saints on this earth. It was not all that long ago that Mother Theresa lived. There are people spread across our planet whose goodness is so profound that there is no explaining it except on the assumption that these good people are simply intoxicated with Jesus. They live beautiful lives. They show us what a human being is capable of. They are part of the beauty that leads God to love our world.

But, alas, there is a lot of sin and wickedness in our world. Sometimes, we read the newspaper and wonder to ourselves, “How is this possible? How can human beings do such things?”

So, our world is a mixed thing. It has both good and bad, both beauty and ugliness. But such as we are, God loves our world.

And this brings me to my third word: “loved.” God *so loved* the world. Do not think that it is easy being God! But then, what is the big deal about things being “easy”? That is not the path our God has chosen. He did not choose the easy way. Instead, he chose the way of love. How does God love? Answer, by giving:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he *gave* his only begotten Son...

God would not permit holy Abraham to do this. The Lord would not permit that man to sacrifice his son Isaac. And yet, our Maker goes ahead and does it. This is so free! Nothing could have compelled our God to give his only begotten Son. In fact, nothing can compel our Maker to not simply shut everything down. But our text says that God so loved that he gave! He did not give a nickel or two. He gave his only begotten Son. He gave the Son who was dear to him. He spoke of his love for the Son more than once in sacred scripture, both at the baptism of Jesus and atop the Mount of Transfiguration. On that holy mountain our God revealed his heart concerning Jesus:

He [Peter] was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my *beloved Son*, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” (Matthew 17:5, RSV)

Indeed, we should listen to Jesus. He is the One upon whom everything depends. He is a good man, beloved of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. We should indeed listen to both his words and his life.

But God show His love — his particular kind of love — in that while we were yet sinners, Jesus Christ died for us. St. Paul is amazed at such wondrous love, and so he writes this to the Romans:

⁷Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. ⁸But God shows *his* love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:7-8, RSV)

It is not easy being God, I say. But the true God is not like Zeus or Apollo, with passing interest in human affairs and an occasional desire to dabble in those affairs. No, the true God loves! He loves, with all the heartache and sacrifice that love can require.

So, there we have it. John 3:16. [Hold up my John 3:16 sign again.] Our Triune God loves our rickety world. He loves it in such a way that he gave his only begotten Son for us.

This is the situation in which we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). You might look to the left, look to the right, and find nothing special. Just our mixed world. But the truth is we are surrounded all the time by our Triune God — the God who loves so much as to give the only begotten Son.

Why? Why does God love so much? The only answer I can think of is that when you and I walk with Jesus and try to take on something of his Spirit, what we are doing is precious in the eyes of our Maker. Indeed it is God-like. It is like the real God. When we live in His fashion, so that we decline sin and love to such a degree that we are willing for it to hurt, then this is what our God is waiting for from you and me. A holy life is what seems to make it all worthwhile to our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.