

“Works Flowing From Grace”

Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Psalms 107:1-3, 10-17; Ephesians 2:8-10; John 3:14-21

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It has been over twenty years since we last saw the rainbow-wigged man holding the John 3:16 sign at sporting events. His enthusiasm for Jesus seems to have morphed into behavior that resulted in him serving three life sentences in prison.

Still, “For God so loved the world...” remains at or near the top of any list of best-known Bible verses; though for a memory verse, church school students still prefer “Jesus wept,” in John 11.

While it stands alone as a single verse, John 3:16 is better understood within its context in the whole of John’s gospel, including the theme of light and darkness introduced in its prologue: *What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.* (John 1:3c-5, 9)

In addition to light and darkness, John’s Gospel also makes a unique connection between belief and eternal life, using the words “eternal life” seventeen times. If you were to take a person-on-the-street poll about the meaning of “eternal life,” I suspect most would relate it to the afterlife – heaven. Eternal life is often thought to be something for which we receive a pass, a coupon, which upon death, we hand to St. Peter at the pearly gates to claim our place in the sweet by and by.

By contrast, John’s Gospel envisions eternal life in the here and now, not the there and then. Put another way, eternal life is as much about our earthly state of being, as it is our future address.

John’s first use of the term is when he recalls the events of Numbers 21. God had sent poisonous snakes after the people complained first about Moses, and then about God. As the mediator between God and the people, Moses was instructed to place a bronze serpent on a pole, and when the Israelites looked at it, they would be healed from the venom of a snake bite. While the caduceus is still a symbol of medicine, few people connect disease, death and tragedy with God’s direct judgment, much less consider looking at a bronze serpent on a pole to be a source of healing. Yet, John’s reference is meant to show the parallel of Jesus as mediator, as one to be lifted up, as an agent of healing and grace. Let us listen and hear God’s word to us in 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 God gave God’s 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. ¹⁸Those 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. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But 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.'*

I want to go back to our reading of a portion of Psalm 107, for a phrase in it prompts my memory of a hand-printed sign I saw years ago in a grocery store in Pennsylvania. As you will often find in local grocery stores, there was a rack in the produce section of this store on which there were packages of fruits and vegetables culled from the regular produce displays because they had bruises or were becoming soft. There was a sign on the rack that read, "Distressed produce."

A funny phrasing, but then I thought it was preferable to labeling the packages as "almost rotten vegetables" or "really damaged fruit." Yet, the sign always made me wonder how the produce people knew the fruits and vegetables were distressed. Did the apples cry out when touched? Did the green peppers flinch when moved? Did this store mandate training in produce psychology and physiology?

While the people cry in their distress, Psalm 107 is a hopeful psalm, through which we find the thread of God's steadfast love for people who are hurting and in need of deliverance. We read two of four sections of the psalm, in which there is the repeated phrase: *Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God delivered them from their distress.* Perhaps we are showing steadfast love in buying those repackaged vegetables and saving them from their distress; in truth, my motive is saving money.

Steadfast love, light, grace – images of God, emanating freely from God, responding to human distress, darkness and despair. These are images and words of salvation, but perhaps not in the way we normally consider salvation. Just as for John, eternal life is not future oriented, so the steadfast love of God, the light shining in darkness, and the unearned grace are saving acts of rescue, to set humanity back on course. Why? Because we believe that is what God desires, not so much for our eternal destiny in the afterlife, but in our here and now life in the earthly realm of God.

I sensed this reinforced when studying the Ephesians text in a course in January. "... by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works..." (Ephesians 2:8-9a) Our works do not prompt God's grace, God's steadfast love, God's light. God's grace prompts our good deeds – good works flow from God's grace. I think of our good works being what God has in mind in expressing grace – through grace, we are enabled to "step into good works." It is like stepping out from the darkness, out from the false security of shadows, into the warmth and brightness of the light of God, the grace of God, the steadfast love of God. Within the grace, we have a sense of rejoicing that prompts our works.

This draws us back to the opening phrase of John 3:16: "For God so loved..." "For God so loved the world..." Out of love comes the sending. "For God so loved the world, God sent the only begotten son." This leads to the images of light and darkness.

A common understanding is light is good and darkness is evil. It is sometimes implied light marks salvation and darkness banishment. John's understanding is less dramatic or divisive. For John, light and darkness differentiate our relation to God's life-saving, light-giving action of sending. Darkness is not the residence of evil, but where we find cover when we do evil. Yet, I also believe we can reside in the shadows apart from sin and evil, those times when we have a sense of emptiness, loneliness, separation, or simply that feeling in the pit of our gut that something is missing, incomplete. We express this when we sigh, "There must be something more..."

If darkness is only seen as the residence of evil, then when we find ourselves in those shadows, we are apt to take on the guilt and shame of having dark places in our lives. What happens when we connect darkness with evil means our human times of distress, doubt, and even depression – what we might call dark times or the dark night of the soul – become mistakenly imprinted with the notion of their presence being a result of our sin. If this happens, it is not unusual for us to retreat, to do everything possible to keep ourselves hidden, perhaps even burrowing deeper into the shadows to isolate ourselves further, to avoid being exposed. I think we are wiser to understand, dark times happen, for all of us, and from them we can grow, for in faith, we believe there is light.

Consider oneself in a dark room, or closet. It is pitch dark with not even a glimmer slipping under the door. You know there is light in the space on the other side of that door, though none of it is reaching into the dark place. Now, you find the handle, and open the door, and what happens? Darkness does not exit the closet and overcome the light – no, light enters the darkness. One cannot push back the light. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

So it is with God, one cannot push back the grace, the steadfast love unless one recloses the door. As powerful a verse as is John 3:16, our understanding of God's desire is as much informed by John 3:17: *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

In risking sending Jesus, the son, God's desire is not to condemn, but to offer the world the supreme expression of love. From the Garden of Eden to the promise to Abraham and Sarah; from the exodus from Egypt, to provisions in the wilderness; from the gift of the promised land, to the return to that land from exile – God's grace abounds. Yet, about every act of God's grace was met with human disobedience or complacency. The writers of the Hebrew Scriptures interpreted enslavements and distresses, plagues and poisonous serpents, as being God's judgment on that disobedience. It became a pattern of grace, disobedience, judgment, grace.

In John's Gospel, the pattern of grace, disobedience, and judgment is set aside. In sending the light into the world, grace and judgment become one.

²⁰*For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But 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.'*

The light shines on all, and is both a test and a corrective. As Fred Craddock writes of the two-fold purpose of the light, “a saving presence can also be a disturbing presence.” (Craddock, Fred, in *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1993, p. 159) It might be likened to those timers that randomly turn on a lamp throughout the night while you are away and then you forget to reset them back home and they surprise you. How do we respond when the lamp comes on in our lives; when its brightness reveals our dark actions and reactions; our less than cordial encounters with store clerks, that neighbor who bothers us, that family member with whom we are unreconciled? How do we respond when a light is focused on our unspoken thoughts, particularly about people we don't like?

In our lesson, there seems to be no choice about the light, for both evil and good are revealed with the flip of a switch. The light of Christ is both judiciously revealing, and graciously welcoming.

God continues to invite us into the light of Christ. The light not only reveals why we may have chosen darkness, but reminds us what we are missing by staying there. Eternal life for the here and now, is not earned as a pass or coupon, but known through our continual willingness to have our lives exposed by a light in which grace and judgment are one. It is grace that draws us into the light, and our good works, our expressions of love, our compassions for justice, flow from our gratitude for that grace.

God sent Jesus into the world so the world – so you and me, and our family and friends, and even our enemies – so the whole world would welcome the light and the opportunity to live in it.