

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Year B

II Chr 36:14-16, 19-23

Ps 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

Eph 2:4-10

Jn 3:14-21

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So, perhaps you, too, have seen the sign at some sporting event or while watching sports on TV. I remember seeing it while watching the Winter Olympics a few years back during the luge run. There it was, a yellow poster board-sized sign with the inscription John 3:16 written on it on big black letters. Some at first might have thought it was a message about calling home at a quarter after three, but then you realize it is a religious message, pointing out one of the Gospel verses in today's readings. Of all the verses in the Gospels, it really lives up to the meaning of the word "Gospel" as "Good News." "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but might have eternal life." This verse truly summarizes what we believe is the central truth of our Christian faith.

It appears in this discourse that Jesus shares with Nicodemus as he meets with Jesus in the middle of the night, and in that darkness of his own questioning is flooded with the light and the hope of this revelation of Jesus concerning his vocation and mission to the world. Nicodemus, like all of us, finds this revelation overwhelming and mind-boggling. How can this be?

In the Creed that we will recite in a few moments there are two phrases that continue this theme from John 3:16. They are: "For us [men] and for our salvation he came down from heaven" and "For our sake...." Both of these phrases as well as the Gospel verse contain the message of God's incredible love for each one of us and for this home we call "earth." It is truly *for us, on behalf of us*, that God enters the history of our broken world to transform it into a history of salvation.

It is the same message that Augustine proclaims in his *Confessions*, as he writes about a God who has always taken the initiative in offering us salvation to the very point of creating us with a restlessness that can only rest in God. God so loves the world and each one of us that he has become one of us, with us and for us. He opens his *Confessions* quoting the psalms and making those sentiments his own: "Great are you, O Lord and wholly to be praised;" "your power is immense and your wisdom is beyond reckoning" (Ps 48:1 and 147:5). How can we ever hope to get our arms around this mystery?

In a worldview of antiquity where the earth was the center and everything revolved around it, even then it was quite a leap for people to believe and attempt to fathom the mystery of a God who wanted to share his Son for us and for our salvation. When I see the continuing stream of photos that comes back to us from the Hubble Telescope showing visions of the unseen and far reaches of the universe, I am even more in awe of a God who cares. When the Mars explorer, a few years ago, photographed the Earth from that planet's surface, the editors of the New York Times had to put an arrow on the photo to identify our planet, because it looked like an indistinguishable speck of dust in the star-filled heavens. Why are we cared for, loved and cherished as much as we believe we are?

John 3:16 speaks about the "why" of Jesus' mission, but not about the "how." It's a few verses ahead of this verse that John presents Jesus hinting at the "how." There (John 3:14) and in two other places (John 8:28 and 12:32,34) Jesus speaks about being lifted up from the earth and drawing all to himself for healing and for salvation, like the bronze serpent in the desert, like the serpent(s) on the pole that is the symbol of the medical profession and the healing arts. This being lifted up into the embrace of him whom nails cannot prevent from reaching out to receive us is, as Paul says today, God's free gift, not our doing at all.

Lent is a time to open ourselves to the overwhelming mystery of God's totally free and all-inclusive love for us and for all people of this world. Lent invites us to surrender to the mystery, to accept its mind-boggling truth and then to accept the challenge contained in the excerpt from Paul's letter to the Ephesians read today: We are all truly God's handiwork, each in our unique giftedness. We are created in and through Christ Jesus, the creating and re-creating Word of God, the "Yes" of God, that urges us to be "yes" for all that needs lifting up and healing in our broken and divided world.

The world needs more signs that proclaim John 3:16. Our mission is to be that living sign of John 3:16 so that everyone can see through our lives that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him might have life. And share abundant life with all, because all yearn to be lifted up, all yearn for light and hope, all yearn for the embrace of God that is Jesus.