

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” ⁶Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 (UMH 830)

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.
²Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble
³and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.
¹⁷Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
¹⁸they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death.
¹⁹Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress;
²⁰he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction.
²¹Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.
²²And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

Ephesians 2:1-10

¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

John 3:14-21

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“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. 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.”

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha

Special Delivery

A Pharisee named Nicodemus came to see Jesus "by night" (3:2). "By night" probably means that Nicodemus didn't want his Pharisee friends to see him visiting Jesus. The Pharisees had become Jesus' worst enemies. But Nicodemus, even though he was a Pharisee, was not Jesus' enemy. On one occasion, he tried to defend Jesus (7:50-51), and after Jesus' death, he brought burial spices to anoint Jesus' body (19:39).

But our Gospel scripture today tells about the time when Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. He came to find out for himself what all the fuss was about. Nicodemus came to see what kind of man Jesus would turn out to be. He came with an open mind, which is more than we could say about most of the Pharisees. I think that he came hoping that he might learn something from this young prophet. He came not knowing what he would find -- but I think that he came hoping he would find something good.

Nicodemus got more than he bargained for. When Jesus started talking, Nicodemus found his head swimming. Jesus talked about being born again, and Nicodemus said, *"How can anyone be born after having grown old?"* Good question! Jesus was using metaphorical language -- coded language -- language that Nicodemus didn't understand.

Jesus said something to Nicodemus that became one of the most popular verses in the Bible. Jesus said: *"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"* (3:16).

Many Christians know that verse by heart, but there are different versions. Some people learned the phrase "everlasting life" instead of the words "eternal life." We love that verse, because it tells us that God loves us. It is a Good News verse -- a REALLY Good News verse.

Our passage this morning is probably the most famous passage of all time. We know verse 16 by heart. We see it on signs at all kinds of sporting events. John 3:16. Martin Luther called it the Gospel in Miniature. I think Luther was right. But I think it's more than just the Gospel in miniature, I think it's God's Divine blueprint. I think it's God's

Design for the salvation of the world. This passage is why we're here. It sums up the mission and ministry of Jesus. It sums up the purpose of the church. It sums up all of salvation history. It sums up God's creative purpose. This is why we're here.

A minister was talking to children in a Sunday School class - testing them to see if they understood the concept of going to heaven. She asked them, *"If I sold my house and my car and had a big garage sale, and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into Heaven?"*

"No!", Answered the children.

"If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into Heaven?"

"No!", Answered the children again.

The minister was starting to smile. This was fun.

"Well, then, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children, and loved my family, would that get me into Heaven?"

"No!", Answered the children yet again.

"Well", she continued, *"How can I get into Heaven?"*

A five year old boy shouted out, *"You gotta be dead!"*

Even though we love verse 16, we are tempted to ignore the verses that come next, because the next verses aren't warm and fuzzy. Jesus says:

*"Those 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" (v. 18).*

Then Jesus goes on to talk about people who love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil -- people who choose to live in darkness because their hearts are evil (v. 19).

It shouldn't surprise us to hear that some people love darkness rather than light. It

shouldn't surprise us to learn that their deeds are evil. Our news is full of stories about people who love darkness rather than light. We read recently about three college students who torched five Alabama Baptist churches as a prank. Then they torched four more churches in another area to try to confuse the police. They weren't ghetto kids, gang bangers, or crack addicts. They came from good homes -- an affluent neighborhood. One was the son of a doctor, and another was the son of a county constable. (Rick Lyman, "Three Students Held in Church Fires Set in Alabama," *New York Times*, March 9, 2006)

Jesus says that people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.

And then we read about Andrew Fastow, of Enron fame. He told his boss, Jeffrey Skilling, about a woman that he was bringing in on a bogus deal. Skilling's only question was, "*Can we trust her?*" -- in other words, "*Can we trust her not to blow the whistle?*" In his court testimony, Fastow told of keeping a handwritten record of bogus deals -- and then destroying it because, "*It wasn't a good document to have hanging around.*" (Carrie Johnson, "Former Enron CFO Implicates Old Bosses," *Washington Post*, March 8, 2006)

Jesus says that people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.

And then we read about Zacarias Moussaoui's trial for conspiring to hijack a plane and fly it into the White House. In Moussaoui's trial, prosecutors read transcripts of radio messages from American Airlines Flight 11. In those recordings, flight attendant Amy Sweeney told ground controllers, "*We are flying low. We are flying very, very low. We are flying way too low.*" And then a pause -- and then, "**Oh, my God, we are way too low!**" Then the transmission stopped as the plane slammed into the World Trade Center building. After hearing the transcript, Moussaoui pumped his right fist in the air and shouted, "*Allah Akbar! God curse America! Bless Osama bin Laden!*" ("Jurors riveted by Flight 11's last minutes," CNN, March 8, 2006).

Jesus says that people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.

The scary part is that it is not just horrible people who love the darkness. There is a little bit of darkness-lover in each of our hearts. We are all capable of things that we are ashamed of -- things that we want to keep hidden.

But the good news is that there is also something in us that loves the light -- that wants the light to overcome the darkness -- that wants to live in a well-lit world where we can see the amber waves of grain -- and the purple mountain majesties -- and the fruited plains -- and the alabaster cities -- and the faces of loved ones -- and all the beautiful things that God has created.

These days there is a bunch of technology that helps people with vision problems. There are lots of wonderful things out there -- large-print books -- easy needle threaders -- high-intensity lamps -- magnifiers -- computer programs. The good news is that technology makes it possible for people with vision problems to do things that they couldn't do otherwise. (Jane E. Brody, "Latest in Technology Gives Life a Clearer Focus," *New York Times*, March 7, 2006)

That is metaphor for life. We all struggle with limited vision. We all walk through life unable to see into the future. We stumble through life missing much of the beauty that lies around us. We go through life with blinders on -- or as one person put it, "Knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing."

But there is something in us that wants to do better -- that wants to see -- that wants our lives to count for something. We are like vision-impaired people -- searching for ways to see -- trying to figure out where we are going and what we should be doing -- trying to understand God's plan for our lives.

In an old a Dennis the Menace cartoon, Dennis and his little friend Joey are leaving Mrs. Wilson's house, their hands full of cookies. Joey says, "*I wonder what we did to deserve this.*" Dennis answers, "*Look, Joey. Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies not because we're nice, but because she's nice.*"

Hank Ketcham, creator of Dennis the Menace, has captured the whole concept of God's Grace in that one little cartoon. It isn't because of what we do, it's because of God. And to put it as simply as possible, it's because God loves us. That's who God is and what God does. And God loves us so much that God sent Jesus.

Part of the reason we are here this morning is because we are seeking help -- looking for guidance -- hoping that God will lead us onto right pathways -- will light our journey -- will keep us from falling -- and will open our eyes to see what we need to see. The Good News is that God will do just that.

The Good News is also that there are many people like us all over the world -- people who want to do the right thing -- people who love the light instead of the darkness. Many of them don't know where to look. That is why Christ calls us to go into all the world making disciples -- spreading the light

Many years ago, before the invention of electric lights, Robert Louis Stevenson looked out his window one evening to see the town lamplighter coming down the street. The lamplighter stopped to light each lamp as he made his way along the street. Stevenson sat

and watched as the lamplighter lit one lamp after another -- bringing more light to the dark street with each newly lighted lamp. His work cheered Stevenson, who sat down and wrote about the lamplighter who was "punching holes in the darkness."

When I read that story, I thought that sounded like a good goal for every Christian. Let us decide to live in the light rather than the darkness. And let us decide to spend our lives "punching holes in the darkness."

The great preacher Billy Strayhorn tells about an essay he received several years ago. It was written by an eight year old boy by the name of Danny Dutton from Chula Vista, California. Danny said:

"One of God's main jobs is making people. He makes these to put in place of the ones that dies so there will be enough people to take care of the things here on earth. He doesn't make grownups. Just babies. I think because they are smaller and easier to make. That way He doesn't have to take up His valuable time teaching them to talk and walk. He can just leave that up to the mothers and fathers. I think it works out pretty good.

God's second most important job is listening to prayers. An awful lot of this goes on, as some people, like preachers and things, pray other times besides bedtime. God doesn't have time to listen to the radio or TV on account of this. As He hears everything, not only prayers, there must be a terrible lot of noise going into His ears unless He has thought of a way to turn it off.

God sees everything and hears everything and is everywhere. Which keeps Him pretty busy. So you shouldn't go wasting His time by going over your parents head and ask for something they said you couldn't have.

Atheists are people who don't believe in God. I don't think there are any in Chula Vista. At least there aren't any who come to our church.

Jesus is God's Son. He used to do all the hard work like walking on water and doing miracles and trying to teach people about God who didn't want to learn. They finally got tired of Him preaching to them and they cursified Him. But He was good and kind like His Father and He told His Father that they didn't know what they were doing and to forgive them, and God said OK.

His Dad appreciated everything He had done and all His hard work on earth, so He tole Him He didn't have to go on the road anymore. He could stay in heaven. So He did. And now He helps His Dad out by listening to prayers and seeing which things are important

for God to take care of and which ones He can take care of himself without bothering God about. Like a secretary -- only more important, of course.

You can pray anytime you want and they are sure to hear you because they've got it worked out so one of them is on duty all the time. You should always go to Sunday School because it makes God happy, and if there's anybody you want to make happy, it's God!

Don't skip Sunday School to do something you think will be more fun, like going to the beach. That is wrong. And besides the sun doesn't come out at the beach until noon, anyway.

If you don't believe in God, besides being an atheist, you will be very lonely, because your parents can't go everywhere with you like to camp, but God can. It's good to know He's around when you're scared of the dark or when you can't swim very good and you get thrown in the real deep water by big kids. But you shouldn't just always think of what God can do for you. I figure God put me here and He can take me back anytime He pleases. And that's why I believe in God."

I think Danny Dutton has a pretty good understanding of Jesus and why he came.

John 3:16 is the motivation behind our purpose as a Church and as individual Christians. God's plan was that we know God's love through Jesus. God's Desire is that we live that love and tell others. This is why we're called.

On Art Linkletter's version of the TV show, 'Kids Say The Darndest Things,' he once interviewed a little girl who was about 6 or 7. He asked her "*What does love look like?*"

The little girl answered "*It's when I let Johnny get in front of me at the drinking fountain.*"

Art Linkletter smiled and said, "*Well, you must love Johnny very much.*" But the little girl responded, "*No, I don't even like him.*"

I think that little girl knows what love is. And I think it's probably because she has experienced the love of God. You and I have not only experienced it, we've given our hearts to the one who loves us this much. And in giving our hearts, we are trying to live out that love in the world, every day. And part of the living out of that love, is sharing that love with others.

We know the secret of the universe. But it's not really a secret, is it? It only remains a secret if we don't tell it. And Jesus said, "*Go and tell it.*" That's our call and that's our

commission. And this passage is why we are called.

Scripture teaches us that God is in the delivery business. God delivered the children of Israel from the hands of the Egyptians. Our Old Testament passage mentions a time when God delivered the Israelites from venomous snakes. Over and over again God delivered God's people from the hands of their enemies. And through Jesus, God delivered us from sin and death.

Of course, that means that we too have to be a part of God's delivery system by delivering the goods ourselves. In other words we have to trust the Author and Creator of this Bible passage. We have to trust God. We have to pray and listen. We have to offer ourselves to God's service just as Christ offered Himself for us. We have to be willing to make a sacrifice. And we have to take our commitment to this little church and to each other seriously and have faith together. It doesn't take much faith. Just a little. Faith the size of a mustard seed. But when we have that kind of faith, Jesus says, "*Nothing will be impossible.*" Nothing.

This is the Word of the Lord this day.