

A Speechless Sermon

The 4th Sunday of Lent sermon (Year B) presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers
presented Sunday, March 11th, 2018 at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to John 3:14-21

The Text For The Sermon: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”* – John 3: 16-17

John 3:16 leaves me speechless (not a good thing for a preacher who is responsible for a sermon every week); it appears a lot of places, and mostly not a quote of the text but just that chapter and verse. Just the name “John” followed by the number “3,” a colon and the number “16.” It appears on placards at sports events, on signs people post on their front lawns and inside the bottom rim of paper cups at fast-food restaurants.

The professional football quarterback Timothy Richard Tebow – you have probably heard him called “Tim” – has been known to print the Biblical reference in his eye black. This he did most famously in 2012 at what became known as “The 3:16 Game,” when Mr. Tebow – then of the Denver Broncos – threw the football a total 316 yards in a playoff upset against the Pittsburgh Steelers, winning the game. Immediately afterward, “John 3 16” became the top Google search. Books are titled “The 3:16 Promise” and “3:16: The Numbers of Hope.” People seem to be really fixated with John 3:16 – and no wonder. The verse has caught attention of sports fans and theologians alike.

Protestant reformer Martin Luther famously called John 3: 16 “the gospel in miniature,” indicating that it is the very heart of our Christian faith. *“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.”* One theologian called it: “The Gospel in a nutshell!” The very heart of our faith – that God loves the world. Need I say more? The “giving of his Son” part will resonate with parents, who sacrifice for their children, with soldiers who sacrifice for their country, and with anyone who sacrifices anything out of love for another. And the idea that everyone may have eternal life – well, that’s the basic Christian hope, right? What parent does not want anything but the very best for their children? What manager does not want anything but the very best outcome? And eternal life is the very best God has to offer. The sacrifice, the giving of one’s best, these are all premised on one simple thing: love – God’s love for us. When you think about it, God’s love is nothing short of miraculous.

God created the world, of course – so that accounts for some of it. But we humans have continued to be such rebellious louts. We ignore God’s plan, we bargain with God’s commands and we fight against God’s justice – at least some of the time.

Again Martin Luther wrote: *“If I were as our Lord God ... and these vile people were as disobedient as they now are, I would knock the world in pieces.”* And you might think God would do just that – knock the world into pieces. Knock the Taliban in pieces along with the Syrian rebels, and then the North Koreans who dangerously toy with nuclear warfare. Knock the Columbian drug lords and the White House into pieces. Knock the “whatever” into pieces. You fill in the blank.

And that’s not all. Each and every one of us is quite capable of doing the most vile sorts of things – and sometimes we do. We trespass against God, we commit offences. In a word we “sin”. Who has not – from time to time – denied God’s goodness in others, in ourselves, or in the world around us? Maybe God should knock us in pieces, too!

But in the person of Jesus, we find a God who is not much interested in retributive justice, not much worried about punishing offenders, not much invested in inflicting a penalty for wrongdoings. No, we find a God who seeks to forgive, for whom restorative justice is the priority, who seeks to repair the hurt – not inflict another. God loves us too much to cause us to cower in fear. God loves us too much to inflict corporal punishment on us. God loves us too much to make us suffer – or to suffer any more than we already do. And that is Good News for us, for all of Christianity, and for the entire world. God loves us.

This doesn't mean we should go around deliberately committing offences and expecting we be forgiven. This does mean that when we cause offense, we will be forgiven by God – but we may also have to pay the earthly penalty for our actions.

When we do things we know are wrong, irresponsible and dangerous, we can pray for God's forgiveness. But we can also expect that our society will demand payment of a penalty, and as Christian citizens of a democratic country, we should be prepared to pay that price, make the necessary apology, restoring what was taken or serve the very community we have harmed. So our job as Christians is first to recognize that God loves each and every one of us, and value just how much that is. When we truly appreciate this deep and abiding truth, our lives change. We take responsibility for our actions, and we seek healing. We admit we have done wrong, we strive to do better, and we strive to be the very image of God in which we are all created – by loving others as God loves us.

A recent film *"Darkest Hour"* was honoured last Sunday evening at the Academy Awards for the performance of Gary Oldman who won the "Best Actor" for his portrayal of Winston Churchill in the days after he became Prime Minister in 1940. With the German armies rolling through Europe, Churchill must figure out how to rally the nation as many of those around him advocate peace talks with Hitler.

In a speech before the British House of Commons on June 4, 1940, Winston Churchill, after outlining the global perspective of Nazi aggression that threatened to soon see German footsoldiers on British soil, spoke these words:

"We shall go on to the end.

We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air...

We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be;

We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills;

We shall never surrender..."

A silence fell over The House for an instant but was quickly disturbed by the resounding standing ovation from Winston's side of the Legislature that spread rapidly to the Opposition who joined into the thrilling response of the entire House. It was quite a moment! Churchill, without one more word, walked out of the House. He was speechless – nothing more needed to be 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." I read that, spiritually digest that, and live my life according to that. What else is there left to say. And so I, too, am left speechless. There is nothing further needed to be said.

Except maybe, *"Amen"*.