

SERMON TITLE: "Meditations on the Cross: The Love of God"
SERMON TEXT: John 3:1-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 13, 2022 (Girl Scout Sunday)

INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday, I attended an Interfaith Works meeting. One of the participants from another church told us about her practice of wearing a different cross necklace every day during the season of Lent. Doris said she has a big collection of cross necklaces that she has acquired over many decades and while traveling to different places in the world. Her collection must be large, since Lent is 40 days plus six Sundays long! Doris told us that—this year, because of the Ukrainian crisis—she started Lent by wearing the crosses which either came from the country of Ukraine or that bear the Ukrainian colors of blue and yellow. After she ran out of those, she started wearing the crosses which bore the colors of the neighboring countries of Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova, which are receiving the millions of refugees who are fleeing the Russian invasion. This is Doris' way of praying for God's love to surround those people who are suffering such a horrific crisis.

This story about Doris and her cross collection goes very well with our Lenten focus. Last Sunday, we began our "meditations on the cross" series with the Apostle Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, in which he wrote how God had turned the weakness and foolishness of the cross into the power and wisdom of God for our salvation. Today, on this second Sunday of Lent, we turn to the Gospel according to John, to ponder how the cross demonstrates to us the love of God.

1—JOHN 3:16—GOD LOVED SO MUCH

As we engage this text from John, chapter three, let's begin with what is most obvious and well-known. Austin read this scripture to us from the New Revised Standard Version. But, since most of us can recite John 3:16 in the King James Version, let's do that right now in unison: "For God so loved the

world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

“For God so loved the world.” That’s one of the most central concepts of Christian faith. When we look at a cross, when we meditate on its meaning, first and foremost in our minds is the fact that God loved the world soooo much! That makes me think of the dialogue I’ve heard people say to one another. The first one says, “I love you soooo much!” And then the second one says, “I love you more.” When we’re trying to think about how much God loves the world, it’s always going to be a quantity more than we could ever imagine. Whatever amount of love we think it might be, God loves even more than that, maybe even ten million more times than that. Or maybe even ten gazillion trillion billion times more than that.

A Christian pastor and author named Max Lucado wrote that God loves you so much that, if God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If God had a wallet, your picture would be in it. Max Lucado wrote his book in a time before so many of us carried a cell phone with pictures. But, if he were writing his book now, I bet he would also add that, if God had a cell phone, your picture would be in it, and, if God could use that cell phone to access the cloud, God would store your picture in *that* digital space. And, no doubt, if God had a Facebook page, your picture would be posted there as well.

2—THE CROSS SHOWS US GOD’S HEALING, LIFE-GIVING LOVE

This familiar scripture of John 3:16 assures us that God’s love is expansive, wonderful, and available to anyone who believes. Of course, we’re not just talking here about the fact that God loves us. We’re talking about how meditating on the cross helps us understand and experience this love of God.

Neither of the words *cross* nor *crucifixion* appear in John 3. But the idea is present in verse 14, where Jesus says that the Son of Man must be lifted up. In this chapter, Jesus explains that, just as the Son of Man descended from heaven, so he will ascend again. That divine ascension would certainly

include the time after the resurrection, but Jesus' ascension would begin by being lifted up on the cross for all the world to see.

To help everyone understand what he was talking about, in John 3:14 Jesus used an example from the Old Testament. The Book of Numbers, chapter 21, tells us that poisonous snakes were a problem for Moses and the Hebrews when they were wandering in the wilderness. In between their escape from slavery in Egypt and their new life in the Promised Land, God's people encountered many struggles of hunger, thirst, conflict, and this problem of deadly serpents. So God told Moses to put a bronze serpent on a pole and lift it up high. When bitten and poisoned people would look at the snake on the pole, they would be healed and live. That bronze snake was also a warning to those who had not yet been bitten. Seeing clearly what the danger was, they were better able to avoid the risk. That uplifted sign allowed them to change their behavior and live.

That snake on the pole was so healing and life-giving that the medical field continues to use a symbol like that today. But I would say that Jesus-lifted-up-on-the-cross has had an even more powerful and life-giving effect on the world. Yes, Jesus *died* on a cross. But not everyone needs to die a tragic or premature death. Our faith in Jesus inspires us to do many things that protect and care for our health and to avoid many behaviors that would cause us harm. Because we're human, our mortal bodies will all eventually give out—no matter how well we take care of them. But, even so, we can be raised to new life in our hearts, minds, and spirits through the divine spirit of Christ.

As Jesus is lifted up before us, we have the opportunity to learn from his teaching. We have the opportunity to believe in his grace and accept his forgiving mercy. Whatever poison is making us sick and killing us, we have the opportunity for healing and revitalization. Even in this life, even today, we have the opportunity to be born again or born from above, so that our lives are renewed in God's love. Jesus-lifted-up-high-on-the-cross is the sign that helps us see and receive this loving gift from God, this gift of eternal life.

This is what John 3:16 is talking about. God loved the world so much that God lifted Jesus up on a cross so we don't have to die in the wilderness of sin. Instead, we can believe in Christ, be healed of the poison, and be born into eternal life.

3—NOTHING CAN SEPARATE US FROM GOD'S LOVE

Frequently, we better understand one scripture by comparing it with another. Romans 8 is another passage that speaks about the love of God as shown by Jesus on the cross. There, we are reminded that God "did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us." But Jesus, who died, was also raised up to the right hand of God, and from there he intercedes for us. So, when we are faced with hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or sword, we can remember that our loving God has good things in store for us too. Romans 8 affirms that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv. 31-38).

If everything in our lives were nice and sweet and perfect, we might not need Jesus on a cross. But our human lives are a lot more complicated than that. After two years of dealing with COVID, it would have been great to just get back to normal life. But what happens? Along comes a Russian invasion of Ukraine that has worldwide implications. And, no doubt, there's other drama and trauma closer to home, as well. In our families, with our health, at work and school, and in our communities—there's always something causing stress and worry. Because of bad luck, because of other people's mistakes, or because of our own poor choices, we humans suffer and die.

And so it helps us to have a Savior who also suffered and died. It helps us to see that the divine Son of God who was born in a lowly stable was also lifted up *on a cross*. No matter how horrible our life might get, no matter how sorry we might feel for ourselves or our loved ones, we have no doubt that Jesus can relate to our misery. When God decided to become incarnate as a human being, God

embraced the good, the bad, and the ugly of human existence. For better and for worse, God entered into the fray. God so loved the world that God gave his only begotten Son, God's very own self, that we might see and believe. Jesus-lifted-up-on-the-cross is God's way of saying to us, "Trust me. I'm there with you. Just like I did with Jesus, I'll get you through this. Whatever you're struggling with, whatever is causing you pain, remember that Jesus died on the cross, so that you might have new and better life." God says to us, "All this is possible because I love you."

CONCLUSION

When we meditate on the cross, many truths and benefits come to us. But one of the most profound and life-changing is our recognition, acceptance, and belief that the cross is a demonstration of God's love. Charles Wesley, one of the early leaders of the Methodist Church and a prolific writer of hymns, expressed it this way:

O Love divine, what hast thou done!
The immortal God hath died for me!
The Father's co-eternal Son
bore all my sins upon the tree.
Th'immortal God for me hath died:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified!*

Whatever else we might think about the cross, may it be a sign to us of the love of God.

**O Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done*, 1742.