Sermon, March 8, 2024

Delivered by Rev. John A. Balicki

St. Luke's Church, Wilton, Maine

Fourth Sunday In Lent

It's been displayed on billboards, t-shirts, coffee mugs, and cross-stitch samplers. Why football player Tim Tebow put it on the black grease under his eyes in the College Championship Game. Our bulletin cover features Rollen Stewart, famously known as "Rainbow Man", who wore a rainbow-colored wig and danced with a "John 3:16" sign behind the goal posts at football games, home plate at baseball games, and the backboard at basketball games.

John 3:16 - In just twenty-seven words, the famous verse from St. John's Gospel describes a loving God, a cherished world, a self-giving Son, a universal invitation, a deliverance from death, and a promise of eternal life. Martin Luther called it "the heart of the Bible, the Gospel in miniature." So what's the problem?

Not the verse itself but what we so often do with it. In making the Gospel message simple and accessible, we sometimes reduce salvation to a formula, forgetting that when Jesus originally spoke the words of John 3:16 to Nicodemus — a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, and likely one of the more erudite men of his day — his listener found Jesus's words incomprehensible. If Jesus really intended to "save" Nicodemus by a pithy soundbite that night, he failed. What the seeker experienced was not salvation; it was bewilderment.

Oh woe is us. We sure don't need more bewilderment. How can we find that salvation, that love of God breaking through the sky and shining on us? Let's take a trip back to the 19th century.

Robert Robinson was just a small boy when his father died. In 18th century England, there was little in the way of a social welfare system and this meant that he had to go to work while still very young. Without a father to guide and steady him, Robert fell in with bad companions. One day his gang of rowdies harassed a drunken gypsy who told him he would live to see his children and grandchildren. This struck a tender spot in his heart and a desire to change his life.

Robert Robinson decided to go hear the Methodist preacher George Whitefield and had a strong experience. He left in dread, under a deep sense of sin that lasted for 3 years.

Finally, at the age of twenty, Robert made peace with God and immediately set out to become a Methodist preacher himself. Two years later, in 1757, he wrote a hymn which expressed his joy in his new faith. "Come, Thou Fount of every blessing", #682 in the blue hymnal. This was the reach for the God he must have felt he needed to cover many faults in his life. Verses two through five each express his spiritual hope in light of his own shortcomings, and the longing of his inner being for Eternity.

In the last stanza, Robert had written:

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love

Prone to wander Robert was. He left the Methodists and became a Baptist. Later on, it was rumored he dabbled in Unitarianism – God forbid!

Had he left the God he loved? A widely-told story says that one day as he was riding in a stagecoach a lady asked him what he thought of the hymn she was humming. He responded, "Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then."

Today we would be prone to respond, "Robert, get over it. If you want the feeling you can have the feeling – you can do anything you want". Gerald May counters by saying,

> *The gentlest form of spiritual narcissism is the idea that one can accomplish one's own spiritual growth. This is the belief that "I can do it." … We do not wake up one morning and spontaneously decide,"Hmm, I think I'll go out and look for God for the rest of my life." The striving, even if we try to own it, was planted in us. It comes from somewhere very deep, from a depth at which one can no longer say, "This is me and only me."*

Frederick Buechner continues this theme by describing the human life in this way,

> *"We work and goof off, we love and dream, we have wonderful times and awful times, are cruelly hurt and hurt others cruelly, get mad and bored and scared stiff and ache with desire, do all such human things as these, and if our faith is not mainly just window dressing or a rabbit's foot or fire insurance, it is because it grows out of precisely this kind of rich human compost. The God of biblical faith is the God who meets us at those moments in which for better or worse we are being most human, most ourselves; and if we lose touch with those moments, if we don't stop from time to time to notice what is happening to us and around us and inside us, we run the tragic risk of losing touch with God too.*

Robert said it this way,

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love

The second verse as Robert wrote the hymn begins with this line,

"Here I raise my Ebenezer: Hither by thy help I'm come."

The modern version in our hymnal reads, "Here I find my greatest treasure; Hither by thy help I've come." Perhaps the line was changed because it was felt that a people without many years of Sunday School and biblical literacy would not know what an Ebenezer referred to. It refers to an event in the First Book of Samuel when the Israelites facing a much stronger Philistine army were victorious because the thundering voice of God threw that army into confusion and they fled. Samuel then took a stone, set it in the ground, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us".

Kathleen Norris writes, "*There is a powerful moment in any religious conversion, perhaps to any faith, in which a person realizes that all of the mentors, and all that they have said, all of the time spent in reading scripture, or engaged in what felt like stupid, boring, or plain hopeless prayer, has been of help after all. It is nothing you have done, but all of it is one event, God's being there, and being of help. The enemies you were facing, whatever obstacles seemed amassed against you, even your own confusion, have simply vanished. And you are certain that it is God who has brought you to this moment, which may even feel like victory.*"

Samuel, Robert and many throughout history have had those moments. Have you? Share it with one you trust, see God at work in moments of your history, rejoice that God not only so loved the world but you also. And then like Robert we can say,

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.