

**Sermon on John 3:14-21, Ephesians 2:1-10, and Numbers**  
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John is my favorite gospel. I don't know if preachers are allowed to have favorites, much less voice them, but the truth is, I love the book of John. The language is beautiful, especially in the first chapter. The gospel offers so many images of who Christ is...vine, living water, Bread of Life, the Way, the Truth, the Life, Light of the World. The encounters that Christ has in the gospel tell so much about who God is. I am especially drawn to the story of Christ's interactions with the woman at the well.

But, the gospel also holds one of my least favorite verses in all of scripture, John 3:16. It's not the writer's fault that I don't like it. And, it certainly isn't God's fault. It's just that I can't stand to see a giant placard held up at football games that proclaims John 3:16. Nor can I stand a license plate with the chapter and verse or the pithy statement at the end of an e-mail which says, "John 3:16". Because somehow, in these instances, I conjure up all those people who have used this verse to shove Christianity down the throats of others...the ones who have used the verse to tout the exclusivity of the Christian faith...the ones who have used the verse as a weapon to hold over the head of another human being.

So, when I have to read this verse within a chunk of scripture, I try to fly right past it. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to even acknowledge it. But this week, the verse has settled into me a bit differently. Maybe it's because it was put together in my mind this week with the Ephesians and the Numbers passages. Or maybe it's because the Spirit was able to push past my stubborn heart. Regardless, I have heard it in a new way.

As I've thought about it this week, I have come to a realization that sometimes, it really is about life and death.

Some people first experience Christ in a life or death situation. The end of the road, the rock bottom of alcoholism or drug addiction, the latest broken bone from abuse, the deep,

lonely, scary pit of depression. The death-giving snakes are biting, just as they did in the time of Moses. Here and now, people are dying. And somehow, through God's grace, they grab onto life through Christ. They hear the words, "God so loved the world"...God loved the whole world, even me—"that whoever believes in God will have life." Life, given freely, as Ephesians tells us. The life is always offered to us through God's amazing grace, and people who are dying can grasp onto it.

Others of us, during our lives, will experience life and death in a split second. The doctor will call telling you that it's cancer. Your girlfriend will get into the car and tell you she's pregnant. Your boss will call you into her office to tell you that you've been fired. The captain will come over the intercom to say that the airplane is experiencing difficulties and will have to make an emergency landing. The bank will send a letter saying that they are initiating foreclosure procedures on your dream home. The policeman will knock on the door telling you that there has been a horrible accident. Life and death. Right in front of you. Right in your personal space. And, in those dark moments when it seems that the night will stretch on forever, the words you've heard for so many years, will come to you. "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only son, that whoever believes will not die, but will have eternal life." Love and life are offered in the midst of death.

And what of that death that comes from the pain that we cause ourselves, others, and God. The deathly pain of broken relationships brought about by our own selfishness or greed. The pain of broken lives brought about by our own apathy. The pain of our own self-loathing or our ego that gets out of control. Death being lived right here, right now.

Isn't suffering and death what the cross is about? It's not that pretty, smooth, gold symbol that we wear around our necks. It's awful and bloody and pain-filled. It is death. Jesus dying on a cross. Jesus has experienced the most horrific of all pain. Jesus has experienced the excruciating pain of feeling completely abandoned in the midst of the deadliest pain. And yet, from that moment through the resurrection, Jesus offers us life. Jesus has been there, is

with us in our deepest deaths because God loves us. “For God so loved...” From death to life, right now, right here.

So often, we think of going from life to death. We are born. We live. We die. But, in all these passages, God changes that around, offering us the option of moving from death to life. “You were dead...but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” That’s what Ephesians says. And in Numbers, everyone who looked upon the bronze serpent, who took the time to gaze upon a sign of God’s power and grace, would live. Even in our death, we are offered life.

So, what if we lived through God’s grace into life as though death is at the very doorstep, instead of living in death? And, what if we lived, offering the life found in Jesus Christ to others who are in life and death moments?

David Lamotte sings a song called, *We Are Each Other’s Angels*. Part of the chorus says, “We are each other’s angels and we meet when it is time.” The verses talk of offering a cup of water when another is thirsty. Breaking bread together. Lifting one another up. Offering life to one another because God first loved us.

So when we find another person or even ourselves in life and death moments, and maybe that’s what all our moments are, my prayer is that we can hold out our hands and offer Jesus Christ to those along the way. We can live together, on the run from death, through God’s incredible grace. We can be one another’s angels. We can cling with all our might to God’s love, offered to us over and over again, even in our darkest, scariest moments. And in clinging, the only way we can respond is to love, to throw God’s lifeline out to others so that they too might live.

Life or death, which will we choose? Amen.