**Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**March 14, 2021**

**Text—John 3:14-21**

I’ve been a pastor at Trinity for almost ten years now, and I have never before done what I am about to do in this sermon. The ladies I work with in the office can tell you: I like to work ahead with my sermons and Bible classes, sometimes really far ahead. For instance, I dedicated the week after Christmas to writing all of my Wednesday Lenten sermons for this year. Working ahead is how I manage to juggle all of the different things I need to do as a pastor, and so I like to have my sermons written at least several weeks in advance of when I preach them. For most of the previous week, this Sunday was supposed to be just like the others. I had a sermon written and prepared, all ready to go. And then Friday evening happened, and I just felt compelled to write a new one from scratch.

On Friday evening, Claire and Jonny and I were driving home from some errand running. Kenny and Marty were with my in-laws for grandparents’ day at the Lutheran school, so they weren’t with us. As we were driving north on West Bypass, just a couple of minutes from our house, another vehicle tried to make a left turn across our lane of traffic, right in front of our minivan. I couldn’t stop in time to avoid hitting it. What my wife and I remember right before the crash is me saying, rather calmly, something like, “We’re going to hit them.” And we did: we smacked right into the right rear corner of the other car. I remember feeling the impact, and all of a sudden seeing airbags. Airbags have a really weird smell to them, almost like gunpowder. The next thing I realized was that I was unhurt, I was okay. And then I heard Jonny screaming. I turned around and looked at him, and pretty quickly realized that he was just really scared, that he wasn’t hurt either. Claire got it the worst of us: she hurt her wrist and got a bruise on her leg, but overall she was okay too.

I got out of the car and saw that the front end was almost completely smashed in; it was totaled. I helped Jonny and Claire out, and then turned my attention to the other car and driver. Thankfully, she was basically okay too; she had some injuries that required medical attention, but it wasn’t anything extremely serious. The worst was avoided: nobody died, and nobody had any catastrophic injuries. After that, we had to wait for the police to arrive, and then the tow trucks, and then we had to get a ride home with Ben and pack all of our stuff into his car, then we turned around and went to the hospital so we could get checked out, just to make sure we were okay. After over five hours of being in the E.R., we finally were able to get home a little before 1:00 that morning. It was a long, hard experience, but at the end of the day, my strongest emotion was thankfulness that everything didn’t turn out much worse than it actually did.

I tell this story not because I want to shock all of you, or because I want to drum up sympathy for us, but because I want all of you to know that it is going to be okay. Not just with our situation, but with your situations too, whatever they may be. God is present with you and he is protecting you, just as he did for us on Friday evening. As I was getting ready for bed after we came home from the hospital, the Scripture verse that kept popping up in my head was John 3:16, which just so happens to be in our Gospel text for this morning. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” And I also remembered the verse that comes right after that, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” I don’t know why it was those particular verses that were stuck in my head. Maybe it’s because it’s John 3:16, the verse that we see everywhere. Maybe it’s because I knew I was preaching on those verses today. Or maybe it was because what I needed to hear at that particular moment was just the Gospel, the pure and simple message of God’s love for humanity and the salvation he has granted to us in his Son. I needed to know that God loved me, and that he loved my family, even as we had just been through this terrible experience. I needed to know that he didn’t condemn me for what I had done, even though legally the accident wasn’t my fault. I was asking myself all of these questions like, “What if I had hit the breaks a little sooner,” or “What if I had managed to turn slightly to the left,” or “What if I had decided to take a little time to look at the toothpaste options while we were at Sam’s, so that we weren’t in that exact spot at that exact time as we were driving home?” I needed to know that God didn’t condemn me for whatever mistakes I had made in that situation. And in John 3:16-17, I found that assurance. Those verses told me that God so loved the world, including me, that he would sacrifice his own Son to save me. And they told me that I was not condemned for my mistakes, because Jesus had not come here to condemn me. He had come to save me and to forgive me, and through faith in him, I would receive full pardon for my sins and the assurance of his love and mercy.

Right now, I know that there are those of you out there who are struggling. I may not know who you all are, but I know that you’re there. Whenever you have a larger group of people like this, it is inevitable that someone will be dealing with something. It is simply a reality of life in this world that bad things happen, sometimes things that really traumatize us and make us wonder how in the world we will cope. COVID-19 has done that for a lot of people, with the restrictions, the isolation, sometimes the financial repercussions. Other things happen too: marriage breakdown, chronic illness, the death of loved ones. All these things have happened to families here at Trinity over the years, and I’m sure some of them are happening right now. Maybe you feel like they’ve happened because of something you did, and you feel responsible for the trials that you or your family are undergoing right now. I’m sure that some of you here today are feeling depressed, lonely, guilty, confused, or hopeless. I’m sure that some of you are in a position where you just don’t know what to do.

Well, that’s why John 3:16 is in the Bible. It’s one of many reasons why that verse is there, but it’s maybe the biggest one. John 3:16, and 17, are there to tell you that God loves you, and that it’s going to be okay. These verses have helped me to find joy and comfort over the last couple of days, and they can help you as well. They will remind you that the Lord your God loves you dearly, so dearly in fact that he sent his only Son to die for you. You have value to him, no matter who you are, what you may be going through, or what you may have done. And he came to earth not to condemn you, as one might have expected the perfect God to do to us sinners, but rather to forgive you for your sins and save you from all of your spiritual enemies. It’s always good to remember the Gospel message, but it’s especially important when you are struggling in some way. The Gospel reminds you that you are not alone, that you have a God who loves you and takes care of you, and that your eternal destiny in his kingdom is secure. Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection from the dead have opened the way to everlasting life for all believers, including all of you here today. That is a sure and unshakable hope, and it is what will pull us through the sorrows and sufferings of life in this sinful world.

Over the past several weeks, my family and I have had the opportunity to see what it’s like to be part of a community that knows God’s love in Jesus Christ. As you all know, my wife had surgery a few weeks ago. It was not a dangerous surgery, and it went very well. She and the rest of us have done quite well overall since then. But the outpouring of support that we have received from the congregation has been, in a word, phenomenal. We’ve had many people send their thoughts and prayers our way, and we’ve received a number of cards in the mail. We basically didn’t have to cook anything for four weeks because of all the meals that people provided for us. Since Claire’s surgery, I’ve eaten about five different types of casseroles that I didn’t even know existed. And all of that happened here, at this church, this community where the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord is proclaimed and made manifest in the way we love one another. I know there are many others of you here who over the years have experienced the same kind of love and support from this church during difficult times as we have. That love comes from somewhere: it comes from God, who showed us what true love is by sending his Son to earth to save us. I am privileged to be the pastor of a church where John 3:16 isn’t just an abstract concept: it manifests itself in concrete ways. It is revealed most fully in the ministry of Word and Sacrament, but it also shows itself in the way that the redeemed people of God care for each other.

All of this is to say that if you are struggling in your life right now in any way, you have come to the right place. Christ’s church is where you need to be. It is in this place that you hear the message of the Gospel, the proclamation that God loves you in Christ and has sacrificed his very own Son to save you from sin, death, and the devil. It is in this place that you receive the body and blood of your Lord Jesus, given and shed for you for your redemption and forgiveness. And it is in this place that you are surrounded by others who have received the blessings of love and mercy from God, so that they will share that love with you whenever you need it. Being a Christian does not guarantee that you will live an easy and stress-free existence; in fact, it often means just the opposite. But it does guarantee that you have a God who will love you and care for you in all times and seasons in life, and he will bring you in the end to everlasting life in his kingdom. Whether things are going well or poorly for you, one thing remains the same: Jesus is Lord, and he promises salvation to all those who trust in him. So what that means is that my family and I, even after our car accident experience, we’re going to be okay. We’ll be okay because God protected us from it being much worse, but even if it had been worse, God would have brought us through that as well. And you also will be okay, no matter what it is you’re dealing with right now. It could be something as small as a tough day at work, or it could be as serious as a terminal illness. Whatever it is, God will be with you through it all, and he will bring you safely to the other side, if not in this life, then certainly in the next. You can always have hope in Christ’s salvation, because God’s love for you in him is undying. Our lives are in his hands, and he will never let us go. So my family and I, we’re going to be okay. And all of you, you will be okay as well. We’re all going to be okay. Because we know, and trust, that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Amen.