FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*“Letting In the Light”* John 3:14-21

As I was writing this sermon, I found myself wondering how to meaningfully talk about the whole idea of light and dark—the light of God and the darkness of our own making. How do we talk about this in a way that is honest and descriptive, without being judgmental or reproachful? And then I thought of my own life and a story that happened in my life a long time ago, but which I still like to think about. It is a story about my mother and me.

My mother was a very pretty woman. She liked to enhance her beauty by dressing-up very nicely and carefully, especially when she had to go out of the house. Every hair had to be in place. Every piece of clothing had to match. Make-up—check. Jewelry—check. Perfume—check. It all coordinated and created a stunning display.

I was very close to my mother—we were very honest with each other. Which is a polite way of saying that we were comfortable being our very best, *and* our very worst with each other.

One flu season, mother came down with a really bad case of it. She ran a fever. She had body aches. She had chills. She developed a hacking cough that often would not let her sleep.

I offered to take her to see the doctor, but she refused. She would be fine, she insisted. She sent me out for a bunch of OTC remedies: for Tylenol, for hot soup, for cough syrup, for all kinds of things that were supposed to make her feel better…none of it worked.

I stayed home from work to take care of her. I made sure she took all of the medicines she had sent me to get for her. There were times I stood over her bed willing her to keep breathing.

If it sounds like I was a little traumatized by all of this…I suppose I was.

So, I changed my tactics. I began insisting that she let me take her to the doctor. I coaxed, I pleaded with her, I threatened. It all got to be rather intense and unpleasant. Indeed, my pleading turned into scolding, and my voice got louder and louder. Finally, after I had shouted myself out, she looked at me and very calmly said:

“I’ll go to the doctor when I feel better.”

Being unable to locate the logic in that statement, I passed her the cough syrup, and left her alone…until she needed to take the next dose.

I will make sense of this story for you in a little while. In the meantime, the passage that we just heard contains one of the most famous, one of the most repeated and quoted sentences from the Gospels—possibly from the whole of the Bible. That would be John 3:16:

*‘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.*

Many of us know this sentence by heart.

Apparently, several big companies on the mainland who have Christian founders include the citation, John 3:16, in their merchandising—it’s on the drink cups at *In-n-Out Burgers,* and I understand that the clothing store, *Forever 21,* prints it at the bottom of their store bags*.*

Their hope is that people will see the reference and go and read the passage for themselves—that people who have never heard of this passage, and even people who are not Christian, will come to know how deeply and dearly God loves them through reading this sentence.

It is a small thing, small and unobtrusive, but I think it is also a powerful expression of hope and caring. If you had to tell a stranger just one thing about Jesus; if you wanted to sum-up Christianity and why you are a faithful follower, *this* is a wonderful and concise way to do it. This is one sentence conveys all the compassion and caring I believe most people are yearning for, are longing to hear and to believe of. This is who God is and wants to be in all our lives. Christ, and life through Christ is everything God wants for all people to have.

However, for all of that, I hope that this one sentence—this John 3:16—rather than the be-all and end-all, I hope it is a *starting point* for who we are as Christians.

Yes, I hope we remember John 3:16. I hope we take it seriously. I hope we hold this truth close to our hearts at all times because this is a really good place to begin our faith journey—especially our Lenten faith journey.

Yes, let us begin with God’s deeply complete love for each of us, and equally as important: let us begin with God’s deep and complete love for *all* of us. Let us begin with a word picture of this truth in our hearts and minds—the whole of creation and *all* people held in a divine embrace that will not let us go. Let us envision ourselves, our families, our neighbors—all people—swept up into God’s attention and concern. No one is left out. No one is left behind—even the ones *we* might have difficulty including.

And because of God loves us and sees so many of us flailing along in the darkness—which is a kind of blindness mostly of our own making—God reaches out. God brings the light to rescue us. Christ is that light. God’s only child is sent to effect a fundamental change in our status as human beings. Because of Jesus, we are offered eternal life. Through Christ, we may become beings of light—very much like him.

Sounds too good to be true—what’s the catch?

Boom! That’s it. There *is* a catch,…of sorts, which has to do with the life we live *within* the love we are offered.

God’s love is a gift. It is offered to us as a gift—there is no charge for God’s faithfulness. However, we are also told in this passage that in order to receive the love God offers, we have to make a choice. We have to turn away from our own ways in order to follow in God’s ways. The Gospel of John says it this way: 17*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

Of course, as good as this is, Jesus knows this is not easy for most of us. He knows we can be stubbornly independent beings who find it difficult to follow anyone else’s program besides our own.

Paul also realized this human tendency when he wrote this in Romans, chapter 7:

*18bI can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*

In case you missed it: what Paul and the Gospel of John is saying to us is that we have free-will. God refuses to be a dictator. Indeed, what this says to me is that God loves us, and wants us to love ourselves, wants us to love the strength, courage, and intelligence we have been given. In short, God treats us with the same dignity and respect we are meant to have toward one another, ourselves, and especially toward God.

However, because we are so loved and respected, this means there is a choice to be made. Both Jesus and Paul also realize how hard it is for the human creature to receive and hold on to the perfect love of God. It seems we are always pulling away, going our own way. It is as if we do not realize just how high the stakes are in this proposition God has put before us.

Jesus’ coming into the world was that proposition. It is through him that God’s intention for us is made real—God’s love is a light that rescues the world from a darkness filled with hate, injustice of all kinds, oppression, and all the other trials and torments we inflict upon others, and even ourselves. It is like a sickness that can be cured, but we have to be willing to accept the help, to take the medicine…or like my mother: you have to be willing to go out and see the doctor, get the medicine *she* gives you *even if you do not look you best on that day!* You still have to go out of the house.

My mother’s vanity was not a great evil. I would even hesitate to call it any kind of an evil. I offered it to you because it did mean that she remained ill for much longer than she should have been. And while I do not believe hers was a great evil, it could have been. It could have become one if pushed far enough.

And I told you this particular story about my mother and me because we all have stories very much like it—where we are given a choice, and we choose something different than our own healing, or the healing of others.

Sometimes the stories we have are played out on a larger theatre than our own, personal lives. They are played out in the community—of which we are a part. It is at that point that the injury becomes much more serious. It is at that point that a foible becomes an evil we cannot, and should not refuse to see.

To be a follower of Christ means that we make a choice about the dark places in our lives—the places where we lack courage, or harbor vanities and untruths, no matter how small. During the season of Lent, we are meant to identify those places and make a choice. And the good news is that Jesus Christ is still our light. Moreover, his is the light that is not overcome. His is the light that we can turn to, always. His is the light that is always ready to drench us with his peace and goodness. We need only turn to him and let his light in. That is our hope. This is our good news.

And so I pray this, it will be so for you, for me, and all of us, together. Amen.