

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

A little over a month ago, our first reading was that famous verse from Micah 6, reminding us that God wants us to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.” And I said that we often treat that passage as a rule to follow, as something we are capable of doing. But I also said that Micah doesn’t treat it that way, because the book of Micah doesn’t end there. I said then that something similar is true of John 3:16, but I promised that I would save that for the second Sunday in Lent. And here we are.

John 3:16 is surely one of the most well-known and often quoted verses in all of the Bible. And if you wanted to sum up the Christian faith using only one verse, that would be a pretty good one. But no one is forcing us to choose only one verse. And I would advise us not to do that, because it can be misleading.

Here’s the verse, standing on its own. “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.” God sent Jesus to save the world from perishing and to give us eternal life. That sounds like pretty good news, doesn’t it? But there seems to be a catch. It’s not just *anyone* who gets those good things. It’s whoever *believes* in Jesus. Okay, we think, that doesn’t seem unreasonable. We can be saved from perishing and live forever and all we have to do is believe? That’s amazing! What do we have to lose?

There was a famous 17th century philosopher named Blaise Pascal who noticed this dynamic about the Christian faith, and came up with the famous “Pascal’s wager.” I’ve used this example before, but it’s worth repeating: The 17th century was a time when science was on the rise and religion was beginning to be called into question – including the very existence of God. And so Pascal tried to make a reasonable argument for being a Christian. He argued that it is a safer bet to assume that there *is* a God than to assume there isn’t. His reasoning went like this. If you assume the existence of God and follow the teachings of the Christian faith and that then proves to be wrong, in other words, if God doesn’t exist and Christianity is useless, well you haven’t really lost much in being wrong about that. If, on the other hand, you assume that God *doesn’t* exist and *that* turns out to be wrong, well then you’re in “a whole heap o’ trouble.”

There are three major problems with this approach. The first is that “assuming that God exists” is not what Jesus means by “believing in God.” We have three words in English that we use to translate a single word in Greek: faith, trust, and belief, and they are not always interchangeable. Belief can be about purely intellectual assent to something. In the last week or so someone asked former President Obama whether he believed aliens existed, by which they meant intelligent extraterrestrials, and he said he did. Now that’s not exactly how it went down, but that’s how I first heard it reported, as a question about belief. That understanding of belief that we use all the time is really about thinking, or guessing. And given what we know about how life evolves, and given the vast size and age of the universe, it’s seems a reasonable guess. But no one would ask President Obama if he *trusted* in aliens. That wouldn’t make any sense. When Jesus is talking about believing in him here in John 3:16, he’s not talking about believing that he exists. That would make no sense to Nicodemus, who he was standing right in front of. Jesus was talking about *trusting* in him, trusting that he was sent by God and was teaching and following God’s ways, trusting him especially when those ways went against the ways of the

world. Pascal missed that faith in this sense is not a simple detached calculation, like a sensible investment strategy. Faith in this sense involves a risky reorientation of one's life and values.

The second problem is that Jesus does not drop the mic after verse 16, or even after verse 17, where today's Gospel reading is supposed to end, according to the lectionary. I added verses 18 through 21. Because what Jesus says *next*, after verse 17, challenges in the strongest terms our presumption that "believing" in Jesus is simple and straightforward, that we are willing and able to keep what we see as our part of the bargain. John 3:16 cannot stand on its own because John 3:19 is lurking just around the corner. Yes, God gave the Son so that we may not perish. Yes, God wants us to trust the Son and have eternal life. But guess what? "This is the judgment," says Jesus, "that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil." God *wants* us to trust the gospel promise in verse 16, but the truth is that we *don't*. And it's not just that we don't. We don't even *want* to. We've gotten used to how things work here in the dark, and have learned to use the darkness to our advantage. We like it in the dark, if we're honest, and we are annoyed by the light. So where does *that* leave us?

It gets worse. The third problem with sticking only with John 3:16 and presuming that believing (or trusting) is our part of the bargain is this: believing is not something we are *able* to do on our own, even if we were inclined to (which, as I've said, we're not.) Faith is a gift of God, worked in us by the Holy Spirit, when the promise of the gospel is made to us. And that is not simple or straightforward. You only need to look at the example of Jesus' original disciples to recognize that. They were continually getting it wrong, continually trying to impose the values of the world on Jesus, like when Peter tried to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem to die. "Get behind me, Satan," he tells him. "You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." But Jesus does not give up on his foolish and slow-to-believe disciples. He brings them along with him to Jerusalem, to witness his arrest and crucifixion, and then to experience his resurrection.

This is where John 3:16 and John 3:19 are leading us, to the cross and beyond, as the means by which God will save the world. And we get connected to that saving act of Jesus through the faith and trust God creates in us. At the end of John's Gospel, after Jesus' resurrection, his disciples come to believe in him, one by one, by seeing and touching him after his is raised. It wasn't only Thomas who had a hard time believing. But Jesus blesses them anyway and breathes the Spirit on them so that they will trust in him, and so they can go and be agents of God's promise. And Jesus does the same for us in our own time and place. He blesses *us* and the church, those who have not seen, but yet believe and trust. That's why John wrote it all down, he tells us, so that people like us may come to trust in Jesus and to count on his promises, not the least of which is life, life as God created life to be.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, here is some really good news: Jesus does not give up on his disciples, and he does not give up on us, ever, even when we are foolish and slow to believe and trust him. Count on that. Count on it because it will allow you to face the uncomfortable truth that John 3:19 reveals about you, and me too, that we too often love the darkness rather than the light, that our deeds, our actions and our failures to act, individually and collectively, are often evil. Count on Jesus' promise, because that annoying light will not stop shining into our darkness. And, as John promises right at the beginning of his Gospel, the darkness will not overcome it. Count on that. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.