

## For God So Loved the World

By: Keith Holste

March 11, 2018. It may be the best-known verse in the Bible. "For God so loved the world..." (John 3:16). In his sermon today, Pastor Keith discusses how this verse applies not specifically to us, but to the whole world including us. Jesus calls us to love the world in the same way God does. God loves the world through us.

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

We begin in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our gospel today includes what may be the best known and repeated verse in the New Testament, and even of the whole Bible. If we were in childhood religious education as in Sunday School or home devotions, we most likely learned this verse very early on in life. And if we've watched a professional football game, chances are good that we've seen references to it as people hold up posters that say John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that God gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life." It is a great verse of comfort that reminds us of the good news of the gospel. God does indeed love us, and God loves the world, and God promises life everlasting.

Our tendency is to apply this verse, I think, to either ourselves or to the people who are around us. We get warm feelings because we have the assurance that God loves us. We think God loves me, and that's great! And that's true and we should celebrate the fact that we can be assured of God's love for each one of us. But as I look at the passage this time, I'm noticing that it doesn't spell out exactly the word "God loves me" but that "God loves the world." God loved the world so that he gave his Son. We as individuals are included in that world certainly, and definitely can believe that we're included in that group that is loved by God. But when we look at it more closely we see that because God loves the world, and we happen to be in the world, God loves us. God's love is bigger than just loving you and me and other human beings. God's love is as big as the world.

The Greek word for "world" is one we know and use: it's "Kosmos." We could say God loved the cosmos so much that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life. That God loves the cosmos, the world, is exceedingly great news. We're given the assurance that God loves this world around us, even though it doesn't present itself very well to God. Original sin, which is with everyone, is about being self-centered and ignoring God. And so even to this world where people choose to go against God, God wants to love. Even where people would rather satisfy their own desires, do what they want to do — to that world God brings the good news of love and life.

We think of our first lesson this morning. We hear the children of Israel in the wilderness. God has led them from slavery by inflicting ten plagues on the Egyptians so that they could be freed from Egypt. And he led them to the Red Sea. When they were up against the Red Sea and they didn't have any way across it, and the Egyptians were coming after them, God opened the sea for them so that they could get across. And then they had come into the wilderness and it was tough. But they couldn't stand it in the wilderness, and didn't remember hardly what God had done for them, and forgot about God really, and were just angry to be out there in the wilderness and did say well, we'd just maybe like to be back in Egypt again. Did they really mean that? But God sent Moses, who prayed on their behalf, and who

was given a clear order from God to make a snake out of bronze and put it up on a pole, so the people could look up to it and be saved from the snake bites that they were getting out in the wilderness. Moses did that. He put it up on the pole, and it was true that when the people looked up at it and believed the message of Moses, they were healed from their deadly snake bites. And we know how, time after time in their exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, the people turned against God and either adopted other gods or tried to figure out other ways on their own to do things, rather than to trust God or to trust Moses. Yet God had made a promise. And God kept the promise. And we know eventually how God brought them to the Promised Land.

So when John tells us that Jesus now is lifted up on a pole, for all to believe in him, he's calling his audience and us to notice the fact that God provides the same salvation now that God did when the bronze snake was on the pole in the wilderness and the people were saved from their snake bites. The two stories connect. As God has saved before, God saves now. God loved then; God loves now. When we think of God loving the world and saving it, we think about how we're involved in this plan. Jesus doesn't just call people to believe in me and now go do what you want. He calls us instead to love the world in the same way that God does, and to show the world and the people in the world, by our love, how God loves them. But not just the people, but Creation, and the place where God has called us to love, this whole round ball and the space around it, is what God loves and what we're called to love too. Called to love Creation, called to love the world, called to love all the people in this world. We are indeed called to love the people. God loves this world that has been made. God cares for us and all the people in it.

And being the ones called by God, we hear that Jesus wants us to be part of the restoration of the world. We are the ones called to share the love of Jesus. We may get looked at with disdain when we do that, or maybe feel embarrassed as we do it. But we are the ones to be God in the places of the world where we are. We bring God's love, God's promise, so that when others see us and see our attachment to Jesus, healing can come to them. This may happen in one-on-one situations, but love for the world is also shown when we organize and work together to help others, or to help them get away to find a sustainable way to live. Or our care may be in ways so that we urge those who have office or the place to change things to do it. And we urge them to make changes so the world is better. We may help people organize, so that they can help their situation. All these ways are giving care to the world. God loves the world, and God loves the world through God's people on earth. So as faithful ones of God, we are those stationed to be in places where we can help and shape things around us to be better. God loves the world through us. God through us loves the world.

Well, Albert Einstein and other physicists have dealt with the interrelationship of time and space. They figure the movements of planets and other objects in space, and see what their speed is in time, and make formulas and predictions about where things in space have been or will be in the future. Jesus uses time also, besides space, to explain about God. In our lesson today he invites his audience to look back and remember what they've heard about when their ancestors were in the desert, and God saved them by means of that bronze snake on a pole that they could look to for healing. That was back in time. That was a long time ago for Jesus to be talking about. Yet it had been kept fresh in their memories, and he could bring that image from the past and use it to explain the healing mission that he had as he would go high on a pole himself and die on a cross. That would be forthcoming. Jesus could have them look back to understand what was happening in the present. That mission of his which is ahead of him is not just a matter of earthly time also. It's a matter of eternity. Jesus speaks of himself on the cross as a gift of eternal life. So it's in time, but also timeless as well.

We live out our mission in Christ in time. We make the best use we can of the past and what has been

handed down to us. It may be what we've observed with our parents or others, and maybe life experiences that we've had which show us how God works. Maybe times we have been forgiven or have forgiven others ourselves, which have tied us closely to God in Christ. We live in time. We live in the present. We think back to the past, but we also point to the future. If we prepare ourselves so that we can do the best each day, living out what it means to be a person of Jesus, we act in loving ways and plan with others, so that in a timely way we can reflect God's love in our style of life. So we live in a place and we live in time. And where we are and how we live is in God's world. Our time is given to us by God. We endeavor to live with the mission of Christ's name, which makes Christ better known in the world, which demonstrates the way of a follower of Christ as we live that way, and which brings healing to the world.

Jesus said God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Jesus has shown us the way. Only the kind of love which he has shown to us can be completely selfless and completely done for the sake of others. Only that will bring healing and wholeness to the world. And having shown us this kind of love on the cross, Jesus calls us to follow him and to bring healing to all the worlds that we are involved in. He calls us to be in a process that ends hate and injustice and oppression, and replace it with justice, compassion, mercy, love, and equality. He calls us to love the neighbor as ourselves. He wants us to make for a better present world and a better future world.

Like the Israelites in the desert, we can look up to the cross — the cross Jesus was on, the one that was actually put there to give us complete life. By looking in faith at Jesus on the cross, the love of God has made clear to us, and we know that God's forgiveness and God's love is there for us. And so we respond in love, loving the world as God has loved it, in every place, in every time, letting Jesus live through us so that there might be a healthy world in all ways. Amen.

And now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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