

Homily for the 4th Sunday in Lent

March 13-14, 2021

Readings: 2 Chronicles 36: 14-16, 19-23; Ephesians 2: 4-10; John 3: 14-21

Preacher: Sonja Livingston

One of the few passages I know by heart is John 3:16. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life.* Knowing this bit of Scripture isn't unusual. It's one of the most widely quoted Bible verses. You see it on bumper stickers, religious pamphlets and highway billboards.

I'm ashamed to admit that I memorized it, not for its beauty or power, but because a Bible Baptist couple on Grand Avenue offered candy to neighborhood kids who could recite the verse during their backyard Bible sessions. My best friend Angie and I were happily Catholic and slightly uncomfortable with the couple's evangelical zeal, but candy was candy and stopping by their weekly sessions to recite John 3:16 in exchange for bubble gum and Tootsie Rolls seemed like a good deal.

The strangest thing to me now is not that we recited the verse to a couple perched on matching lawn chairs with an enormous bowl of candy between them, but that the message failed to sink in. How can a person repeat such monumental words once a week and never truly hear them? *For God so loved the world. Wow. So that we might not perish but have eternal life.* Double wow. It's possible the verse sounded too far removed from Grand Avenue to be real. Or perhaps there's a difference between speaking words with an open heart and parroting them merely to earn a reward.

As we've heard over the past few weeks, Lent is our invitation to return home. The season provides time and space apart from the ordinary noise of the world to reflect on why and how we've strayed so far afield. We're encouraged to consider the various habits, distractions and insecurities that cause us to neglect our relationship with God. Our readings have underscored the need to heed God's word while reminding us that the exile is never mutual. The wandering and forgetting is always on our side. God is head over heels in love and awaiting our return.

Today's readings highlight the scope and depth of that love, even as they illustrate our struggle to receive it. We are *his handiwork*, we hear in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, while the psalm expresses the longing and despair that come from exile. The Jewish people have been asked to sing by their Babylonian captors, but are so besieged by grief, they've hung their instruments from branches and sit weeping by the river.

They might mouth the lyrics but, like the neighborhood kids reciting 3:16 on Grand Avenue so long ago, the words ring more hollow than true. *How could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?*, the psalmist laments. And, of course, the famous lines from John remind us that Jesus is a light that shines on our brokenness, the One who will allow his own body to be broken in order to guide us through the darkness and shepherd us back home.

Even with all the beautiful assurances and the best of intentions, we tend to get caught up in the rush of our lives and struggle to stay connected. In despair or exhaustion, we abandon our instruments of prayer and thanksgiving and find ourselves disconnected from our home in God when it is, in fact, our most permanent address and knitted into every last one of our cells.

Even as we round the corner toward the remaining weeks of this holy season and arrive at this *Laetare* Sunday—or mid-Lenten pause to rejoice—we're issued another invitation to shake off our despair and turn back toward home. We're encouraged to take up the precious instruments we've set aside and to make use of our voices—not simply to go through the motions or to recite memorized words—but to sing beautiful and true praises to God.

If I could go back to 1978 and find that Bible Baptist couple sitting in their twin lawn chairs on Grand Avenue, I'd tell them to keep their penny candy. Actually, I have a terrible sweet tooth and would probably still go for the Tootsie Rolls. But first, I'd explain to my evangelizing friends that none of us neighborhood kids—no matter how hungry—would have required the snare of sugar, if we'd only understood the greater sweetness of the verse.