

## “Covenant Continued”

Once again, John 3:16 is the chosen scripture for the Sunday sermon. It wasn't just my choosing but churches across the world are lifting up perhaps your favorite verse for this, the fourth Sunday in Lent. And why not? The entire Gospel, the entire purpose and passion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is revealed in just 25 words. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”* (KJV) What more is needed to be said?

These words were placed at the midpoint of our holy season this year to give us perspective on our Lenten journey. They are a guidepost; they provide a place to mark your bearings – a chance to look back to see where you've been. They provide resilience to reach your destination. It is just like a taking a physical journey. These scriptures are our map and compass.

I remember a couple of years ago when I was hiking in the Smoky Mountains, I wanted to make the trek up to Clingmans Dome, the highest point in Tennessee. After finally reaching the mountaintop summit, I not only was winded but was breathless at the beautiful view that could only be seen by the journey. It was like I had a special relationship with every plant and person who made it up there.

I found there was more. I could yet climb up an eerie concrete spiral walkway that would take me even higher. It gives those not afraid of heights or shaky knees an even greater perspective of the beautiful land. I reached its observation deck. In seeing for miles and miles, I had new resolve to appreciate not just where I had been but also the remainder of my trip back to where I began. I realized I was in the middle of a spiritual journey that was tied to the land and God's beautiful creation.

Thanks to the Bauer family and their photos from Clingmans Dome and of the Smoky Mountains that are on our screen, perhaps you can gain an appreciation of the spiritual wonders of God's love expressed through creation, especially if you have not had the opportunity to visit places such as the Smokies. Jon told me how he and the boys drove up to Clingman's Dome at 4:30 in the morning just to catch the sunrise. It was no easy drive. They had to negotiate switchbacks in the dark, but the experience was worth the risk. They thought they would have the joy of solitude but discovered five other cars waiting for a transfiguration too – yet having a shared spiritual experience is wonderful just as well.

A friend was sharing when she too hiked up to Clingmans Dome. It had been raining. True to Smoky Mountain fashion there remained a breathtaking mist in the valley that was warmed by the breaking sun. It's the perfect combination for rainbow time! Only from her vantage point looking down, she did not see merely a rain bow, or an arc of the prism's reflection, but she saw an entire circle of the colorful spectrum of light. It was a rain ring! Can you imagine? For her too, reaching this mid point of her journey, at the apex, gave enormous value to her climb and descent.

Like journeying to a mountaintop, John 3:16 gives us a beautiful full-circle 360 degree panorama rain ring of God's love at the midpoint apex of our climb into understanding God's covenantal relationship with us. Those who follow the Lenten scripture reading cycle discovered that the passage for the first Sunday in Lent was the story of Noah's ark (Gen. 9:8-17). The rainbow became the sign of the first expressed covenant of God's protection and love.

The passage for the second Sunday in Lent was God's covenant to Abraham that he would become the father of the faith and that his descendents will be forever blessed (Gen. 17:1-16). Last week's reading was the covenantal promise of God's law and protection written down in the form of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17). Here we are today at the apex on this fourth Sunday. We Christians are reminded in John 3:16 of our heritage of God's love, relationship and law revealed in Jesus Christ.

Readers of further Lenten scriptures will gain new perspective as we continue. Next week, the lectionary provides Jeremiah's prophesy of the new covenant that is revealed in Jesus Christ (Jer. 31:31-34). The pilgrims who sojourn through Palm Sunday into Holy Week and ultimately to Easter will see God's love unfold in the death and resurrection of Jesus (Mark 14:1 - 16:8). (I have noted these readings in the bulletin so you too can follow the progression.) The promise is fulfilled, "whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life."

Everlasting love and life are not bad promises to have from our God, eh? These are the covenants that bless us as Christians. This is the crux of our faith. People yearning to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ begin here because they too want to be loved. In their search, on their mountaintop journey, they will begin seeing God by looking at Christians on their pathway. They will ask and we should ask, what from our shared journey will provide them a panoramic view – a rain ring of brilliant color?

Here lies our challenge. How can or how do we show them God's love. Sometimes we have a difficult time expressing love even in our own families. How can people know God's love if we disciples of Christ don't show love for each other? We are funny in this way because God has no problem expressing God's love to us. Just like creating an entire mountain range just to get our attention, so to speak. Let the light shine through!

John Updike, who passed away recently, was regarded as a keen observer of struggles in the daily Christian life. Sometimes we have difficulty expressing love for God in our own churches. One of his more poignant essays is titled "Churchgoing." He writes:

*"There was a time when I wondered why more people did not go to church. Taken purely as a human recreation, what could be more delightful, more unexpected than to enter a venerable and lavishly scaled building kept warm and clean for us one or two hours a week and to sit and stand in unison and sing and recite creeds and petitions that are like paths worn smooth in the raw terrain of our hearts?"*

*To listen, or not listen, as a poorly paid but resplendently robed man strives to console us with scraps of ancient epistles and halting accounts, hopelessly compromised by words, of those intimations of divine joy that are like pain in that, their instant gone, the mind cannot remember or believe them; to witness the windows donated by departed patrons and the altar flowers arranged by withdrawn hands and the whole considered spectacle lustrous beneath its patina of inheritance; to pay, for all this, no more than we are moved to give—surely in all democracy there is nothing like it.*

*Indeed, it is the most available democratic experience. We vote less than once a year. Only in church and at the polls are we actually given our supposed value, the soul-unit of one, with its nominal arithmetic of equality: one equals one.”\**

We here at St. Peter’s, who don’t live in East Tennessee, have created and maintained what can be expressed as a mountaintop journey experience right here. Our 142-year-old sanctuary reflects a heritage that is not replicated in church architecture today. Right next to it is a most beautiful and exciting contemporary design for spiritual reflection and inspiration. Our atrium boldly demonstrates to our worshipers and the general public that we are a 21<sup>st</sup>-century church with a 21<sup>st</sup>-century aesthetic vision. May we never underestimate or take our accomplishment and God’s grace for granted.

On many occasions, people have come to sit in the atrium and meditate while at the same time being bathed in the sunlight that comes shining through the ceiling. It has become a cherished spot for wedding receiving lines, pictures, funeral visitations and as we enjoyed many Sundays, happy fellowship. Yes, indeed, God loves us and has provided ways that help us love each other. God’s covenant continues to this day. Let the Light Shine Through! Look around and discover a rain ring.

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\* John Updike, from “Churchgoing,” *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*, 1962, pp 249-250