The Love That Sends Light into Darkness

Anglican • Catholic Lectionary Homily

John 3:16-21 • Mixed congregation

Reading Context

We find ourselves on the Fourth Sunday of Lent — that Sunday which the tradition has long called Laetare, from the Latin 'rejoice.' Even as we keep our Lenten discipline, the lectionary opens a window onto Easter's light. The appointed readings form a single theological arc. In Numbers, the children of Israel — dying in the wilderness from serpent venom — are given a strange mercy: Moses lifts a bronze serpent on a pole, and all who look upon it live. In Ephesians, Paul reaches for language that can barely contain the mystery: 'by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.' Then John brings the arc to its climax: 'just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.' The word of the Cross is being sounded before we have reached the Cross.

These readings come to us through the lectionary, which has been the Church's appointed means of hearing the whole counsel of God across the seasons of the year. Week after week, generation after generation, through the three-fold ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons, the assembly has gathered to hear exactly these words proclaimed. Augustine, meditating on this very passage, wrote: 'He who made us did not want to lose us. He descended to us so that he might lift us up.' That economy of descent and ascent — the Word made flesh, the Christ lifted up — is the very grammar of our salvation.

John 3:14-21, Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:4-8

> **Illustration: Rose Sunday in a Purple Season**
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> On Laetare Sunday, some Anglican and Catholic parishes traditionally vest in rose rather than violet — a small, visible pause in the Lenten purple. It is a liturgical whisper: even in fasting, joy is not far. The lectionary does something similar in its choice of readings: in the midst of a season of penitence, it hands us John 3:16. The light is already shining. The question is whether we will come to it.
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> *Source: Anglican and Catholic liturgical tradition, Laetare Sunday*

Theological Reflection

The central mystery of these verses is not, in the first instance, a doctrine about judgment — though judgment is real and John does not flinch from it. The central mystery is love. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.' Rowan Williams has observed that in John's Gospel, love is never abstract or sentimental; it is always expressed in movement — in sending, in giving, in laying down. The love of God is not a feeling that God has; it is an action that God takes.

The Greek verb at the heart of this verse — edoken, 'he gave' — carries sacrificial weight. Fleming Rutledge has noted how readily John 3:16 is domesticated: printed on placards at sporting events, recited until familiarity strips it of its edge. But this is not the giving of a gift from surplus. It is the giving of what is most precious, wholly and without reservation, for the life of the world. The Father does not loan the Son into creation; he gives him, in the full sacrificial sense of that word.

And what is 'the world' here? John uses kosmos not to mean merely the elect, or the already-faithful, but the whole disordered, darkness-preferring creation organized around its own self-sufficiency. This is precisely where the Anglican tradition's threefold cord of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason proves its worth. The broad church tradition — comprehensive in its scope, reading

Scripture within the community of the Church and engaging it with sanctified reason — has consistently held that the scope of God's love is as wide as creation itself. We do not narrow the kosmos to the already-converted.

The contrast of light and darkness in verses nineteen through twenty-one is not a simple moral division between good people and bad. N.T. Wright observes that in John's cosmos, the light is not one option among several — it is reality itself. To come to the light is to come to what is real. Condemnation, John tells us, is not primarily an external verdict imposed from outside; it is the self-chosen state of those who prefer illusion to reality, who 'loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.' The Anglican tradition, shaped by its incarnational and sacramental sensibility, does not speculate about the mechanics of judgment. It simply names the tragedy with pastoral honesty: we were made for light, and turning from it is its own undoing.

This is why the baptismal covenant remains so central to Anglican identity. In baptism — genuinely efficacious, not mere symbol — we were brought from darkness into light, grafted into the Body of Christ, given a new orientation. That covenant is not a single past event but a lifelong daily turning: toward the light, sustained through common prayer, through the Daily Office, through the shared life of the parish.

John 3:16-21, Ephesians 2:1-3, 1 John 1:5-7

Illustration: Rutledge on the Stadium Banner

The theologian Fleming Rutledge once observed that John 3:16 has been so frequently quoted on stadium banners and in popular religion that its shock has been absorbed into background noise. But read in its Johannine context — immediately after the sign of the bronze serpent lifted up, in the shadow of an approaching crucifixion — it is anything but comfortable. 'God so loved the world' is not a truism. It is the announcement of the most costly thing in the universe: the unreserved self-giving of God.

Source: Fleming Rutledge, The Crucifixion (Eerdmans, 2015), paraphrase

Eucharistic Connection

The One who was lifted up — the One John holds before us in these verses — is the same One who will be made present to us at this altar in a few moments. Here we arrive at the theological climax of our gathering. The Liturgy of the Word does not conclude when the Gospel book is closed; it finds its completion at the table. Word and Sacrament are not two separate acts. They are one act of God in two movements.

'God so loved the world that he gave' — and in the breaking of bread, that giving continues. The real presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist is not something the Anglican via media pins down with philosophical precision. The middle way — at once catholic and reformed — has wisely declined to dogmatize the mode of Christ's presence in the sacrament, refusing the language of transubstantiation as required doctrine while equally refusing to say this is merely a memorial. But the fact of presence — that the risen Christ meets us here through the sacramental mystery, that bread and cup become for us the vehicle of the very love proclaimed in John three sixteen — this the tradition affirms with joy and solemnity, transmitted through apostolic succession from the night he was betrayed.

Rowan Williams has written that the Eucharist is 'the place where the world is handed back to God, already carrying within it the seeds of its transformation.' We bring to this altar whatever darkness we have carried through the week — our failures, our fears, the ways we have loved darkness rather than light — and we receive in return the Light of the world in the humblest of forms: bread and cup. The Eucharistic prayer of the Book of Common Prayer echoes this very passage: the

Father sends the Son for the life of the world; the Son gives himself; and we receive that gift in the most incarnational, sacramental act the Church knows. 'On the night that he was betrayed, he took bread.' The same love spoken of in John three sixteen reaches toward us across this altar. Come and receive what you were made for.

John 6:35, John 6:51, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Illustration: The Bronze Serpent and the Altar

In the typological reading shared by both Anglican and Catholic tradition, the bronze serpent lifted by Moses is a figure of Christ crucified. Justin Martyr and Cyril of Alexandria both saw in it the same pattern: a healing sign is raised up so that all who look upon it may live. The Eucharist fulfills this pattern. We come to this table to look upon the One who was lifted up, and in that looking — in that receiving — we find life. The altar is not a repetition of Calvary; it is the ongoing presence of the One Sacrifice in which, through ordered freedom and common prayer, the whole assembly is invited to participate.

Source: Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, c. AD 155; Anglican Eucharistic theology

Faithful Response

We are sent from this place with a commission. 'Everyone who does what is true comes to the light,' John says, 'so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.' To come to the light is not a single dramatic moment; it is a daily practice of orientation — a daily choosing of what is real over what is merely comfortable.

Here is the invitation this Sunday: return to the Daily Office. Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer are the Church's ancient rhythm of walking in the light — immersing ourselves each day in Scripture and Psalms, orienting our waking and sleeping toward the God who loved the world and gave his Son for it. The Daily Office is not a devotional extra; it is the Church's daily practice of coming to the light. In a world organized around distraction, to open the Office — even briefly, even imperfectly — is to make a theological declaration: I belong to the light.

We leave this altar, fed by the real presence of the One who is the Light of the world, and we carry that light into our parishes, our households, our neighborhoods. The baptismal covenant we share calls us not merely to believe but to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. That is the light made visible — the love of John 3:16 extended through our hands and voices into the world God so loved. Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.

John 3:21, Romans 13:12-14, Ephesians 5:8-14

Illustration: Ordered Freedom in a Season of Grief

A young curate once confessed that she had long resisted the Daily Office — it seemed too structured, too formal, not spontaneous enough for genuine prayer. Then, in a season of deep grief, she found herself unable to pray at all. She opened Morning Prayer and read words others had prayed for centuries: 'O Lord, open thou our lips; and our mouth shall shew forth thy praise.' She did not have to find the words. The Church gave them to her. That is ordered freedom — the gift the Anglican tradition offers to those who are too tired, too broken, or too uncertain to begin alone.

Source: Original illustration reflecting Anglican Daily Office tradition

Applications

- Commit to praying either Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer from the Book of Common Prayer for the remaining weeks of Lent — the Church's daily act of coming to the light.
- Reflect honestly on one area of your life where you have chosen the comfort of darkness over the challenge of light, and name it before God in the sacrament of reconciliation or in personal prayer.

• At the Eucharist this week, receive the bread and cup with deliberate attentiveness — this is the same self-giving love announced in John 3:16, made present for you in bread and wine.
• Identify one person in your parish who seems to hover on the edge — who comes toward the light but hesitantly — and offer the simple gift of welcome and genuine presence.
• Share a meal or act of service with someone living on the margins of your community, carrying the love of John 3:16 outward through your hands.

Prayer Suggestions

• Pray for those in your parish and community who are living in genuine darkness — addiction, despair, profound loneliness — that the light of Christ may reach them through the ministry of the Church.
• Give thanks for the gift of the baptismal covenant, and ask for grace to renew your daily orientation toward the light through common prayer and the Daily Office.
• Intercede for the worldwide Anglican Communion, that in its diversity and tension, it may remain a community that loves what is true and comes to the light together in ordered freedom.
• Ask forgiveness for the specific ways you have preferred the comfort of darkness — habits of evasion, unexamined compromises, chosen silences — and receive the absolution offered in Christ's name.
• Pray the Collect for Purity before you receive the Eucharist: 'Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy holy name.'