

# *Sermon: Lent IV*

Mr. Pete Homeyer

March 15, 2015

Year B

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Good morning. It is good to be back here with you after my travels of the past couple of weeks. Please be seated.

I'd like to begin this morning by asking you a simple question, and I hope a few of you will respond. In just a sentence or two, can you tell me why you are a Christian?

(Wait. Field 3-5 responses)

Thank you. Those are all excellent answers and it might be a simple question but it isn't an easy answer, is it? I guess for me, if I had to give my "elevator speech" on why Christianity matters to me I would simply say this: When I am practicing Christianity I find I am my best, most authentic self.

And that's what I want to talk about today, living into our best selves, the one God calls us to be. I believe that is what Paul is talking about at the end of the reading from Ephesians today. Could someone find verse 10 of chapter 2 and read it for us?

(Wait for "For we are as he made us, created for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.")

Thank you. Created for good works which God prepared to be our way of life. I'd say that's pretty clear, but not easy. But before I go any farther would you please join me in prayer?

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So, here's a joke I heard recently. A large meteor is going to strike the earth and scientists are certain it will destroy all life on earth and that it will hit precisely at noon on the next Sunday. A Baptist minister, a Catholic priest, and an Episcopal priest are together during the week before the meteor strike and someone asks them what they will preach on that Sunday. The Baptist minister says, "That's easy, John 3:16, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that those who believe in him shall not die but have eternal life,' and after that we will have an alter call so that when the meteor hits everyone will be saved and can go directly to heaven." The Catholic priest is asked next and he says, "That's easy, Matthew 16:18, 'And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I shall build my church and the gates of Hades shall not overcome it', and after that we will offer everyone confession so that when the meteor strikes everyone will be forgiven and can go directly to heaven." Finally the Episcopal priest is asked and she says, "That's easy, we will do whatever the assigned reading is. It isn't that big a deal, it's just the end of the world. There's no reason to change the scriptures."

Well this Sunday the lectionary gives us John 3:16, so today we claim this passage as our own, as much as any other faith tradition. I guess if a meteor is going to strike at noon today we will be having the same reading as the Baptists congregation in my joke. I'll leave it up to Father Mike to decide if he wants to incorporate an alter call into the service, that is an alter call different than the one we already have every Sunday. (get poster board with JOHN 3:16 written on it. Hold it up)

I don't know about for you, but for me this can be a difficult passage in the Gospels. I think it is because I associate it with pushy evangelical Christians who I believe are judging me. Maybe you feel the same. Does anybody remember this guy?  
(get rainbow wig and put it on while continuing to hold sign) Rainbow Man!

Rainbow man has a name, Rollen Stewart, and he was a fixture at sporting events during the 1970s and 80s. He would carefully place himself in locations in stadiums

where the camera would catch his rainbow wig and the John 3:16 sign he would be holding up. His stated purpose in doing this was to, "bring real religion to the only place most people now went to worship - sporting events." An admirable idea.

But Mr. Stewart's story is a little more complicated than that. When his message at sporting events didn't seem to be changing the world fast enough he moved on to more radical notions. Like setting off stink bombs at a music awards show because the music "stinks" and taking three people hostage at a hotel near Los Angeles International Airport while covering the windows of the room with posters on which were written, "John 3:16" because he was sure the rapture was coming in 5 days.

Mr. Stewart is now serving 3 life sentences in jail and I would venture to say that somewhere along the way he lost his best, most authentic self.

(take off rainbow wig and put down sign)

But staying in touch with our best self isn't easy, is it? Look at our reading today from Numbers. Here are God's people wandering in the desert. They have already received numerous signs and miracles from God. They have been taken out of bondage in Egypt, passed through the Red Sea, given food, given water, and in last Sunday's Old Testament reading, given the Ten Commandments. But what are they still doing? Complaining! Why did you bring us out here where the food is terrible and we don't have enough water? And as if that wasn't enough now we have to deal with snakes! And so God makes another sign for them of his love and fidelity in the form of the bronze serpent so that even the snakes cannot harm them.

Even when we are not our best selves God wants to save us. (pause)

As many of you know I am currently going through a process to possibly become an ordained minister. This process began just over a year ago when I was sitting in my car on a Friday afternoon, headed home at the end of the day with nothing on my mind but

what to have for dinner and what to do with my free time over the weekend. While sitting at a light, I heard a voice speak to me as clearly as if another person was riding with me in the car.

The voice said, "You are doing the wrong thing with your life." And I knew immediately what that meant - that I was supposed to be a minister and not the work I am currently doing.

What do you imagine my response was to this message? The very first time I can remember God ever speaking to me in such a direct and obvious way? Happy? Excited? Proud? Nope, I was pissed! So angry that I spent the rest of the car ride home beating the steering wheel and yelling over and over, "No. No! NO!"

Why was I so angry? Because I already had a plan. Because, like the ancient Israelites, I thought I had already done enough, done my share. Because I didn't want to work at it anymore and I knew what God was up to and I didn't like it. She was saying, to paraphrase the words from Ephesians, "I made you before you were born to do good work."

That work like God's love, never ends.

(pick up John 3:16 sign)

Now when I am confronted with John 3:16 I try to focus on the first part of the passage, "For God so loved..." After all, isn't that how it all begins? Aren't these the words that give meaning to the rest? I'll leave the judgment, in whatever form it might take, for God to figure out. I have enough to do in becoming my best, most authentic self.

In the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen

(place John 3:16 sign over head, wear as sandwich board for the rest of the service)