

Looking Into the Heart of God  
(Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107:1-3,17-22,  
John 3:13-18)

**--(Our favorite verse is John 3:16, because it speaks about the immeasurable love of God.)**

What is your favorite Bible verse? Don't say it out loud. Just think it. I'll bet that a lot of you said, "John 3:16." "For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone that believes in him may not die but have eternal life." Why is it that we love that verse so much? Because it speaks to us about a love of God that is broader than the measures of our mind. It is greater than we can conceive. God loves the whole world. Not just good guys, but bad guys too. Not just the rich and famous, but homeless people too. Rich bitches and trailer trash too. We like the verse, because the love it talks about has touched our lives. The Rev. Camille Littleton says that the love of God has made a big difference for her. "My church background . . . is a strong one. The people there, priest, organist-choirmaster, Sunday School teachers, friends, all shaped in a very positive way my understanding of God and God's love for me and others. I felt the church to be my home and the people of my family. . . As many people do, I gave up most of my church involvement when I was in college and during my early twenties. . . . When I did start back to church it was mostly because of my 18-month-old daughter; I wanted her to experience the church in a way similar to the way I remembered it." (In Women of the Word – Susan Hunter, Publishing) The love of God so nurtured her when she was growing up, that she wanted her daughter to experience that same love. God's love is not just words, God's love is a reality that redeems people lives. No wonder we like John 3:16. God loved, God loves the world so much.

**--(Passages that speak about punishment or condemnation do not fare so well. Churches are filled on Easter Sunday, but don't expect a crowd on Good Friday!)**

There are other verses in the Bible that are not so well received. Our passage from the Old Testament is like this. I am disturbed when I read it. Try to put yourselves in the place of the Israelite children. They have been abused, beaten and oppressed. Finally God sends someone who springs them free. But when they get out into the middle of the desert, they begin to wonder if they haven't jumped from the frying pan into the fire. I mean, things were hard in Egypt, but at least they knew where the next meal was coming from. Here they have all the freedom they could ever want, (except maybe the freedom to grumble) but food and water is so scarce that they wonder if they'll live long enough to enjoy it. So God gives them some c-rations, finally. But manna day after day can get to you. They complain a little, and when they do their lives turn into a nightmare. Snakes come out of nowhere to bite them dead. Pit vipers and rattle snakes, water moccasins and coral snakes. What kind of God does this to his children? What ever happened to "God so loved the world"? Maybe God only loves the non-complaining world, but for the gripers there he has a cage filled with pit vipers.

**--(And yet to ignore the reality of evil in our world, even in our own lives is to live in a world of make believe. To say that sin never touches us is to deceive ourselves.)**

I don't like Bible verses like these. They really bother me. Even so, I believe that they reflect the reality of evil and wickedness in our world. People do make wrong

choices and go down wrong roads. And the choices that people make have real consequences. Poisonous snake bites seem like a rather arbitrary consequence for complaining. But anyone who says that real consequences don't attach to our behavior has never been caught in the destructive web of alcoholism, or temper, or gambling, or addiction to pornography, or controlling behavior, or anger or unforgiveness or pride. They have not experienced the destruction that comes with captivity to alcohol or temper, gambling, lust, controlling behavior, anger or unforgiveness. Wrong roads lead to broken ends. Capital punishment is a terribly unfair and arbitrary punishment for grumbling about cafeteria food. Hardly seems like the loving God I know in Christ. But there are evils in the world that deserve condemnation—evils, like holocaust, like torture, like oppression deserve the harshest form of condemnation. If God treated such wickedness lightly, there would be something would be wrong with God. Now we come to the New Testament. We come to the favorite verse in the whole Bible. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." Two verses later this prickly verse. "Whoever believes is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already." It's not fair that our world should be divided between the haves and the have nots, that the rich should continue to get richer while the poor get poorer. It's not fair that some should sit in the comfort of their living rooms and watch war on TV while others a world away suffer and die as bodies are torn apart. But why should God make it worse by dividing folks into saved and lost condemned and not condemned? Even these words have a ring of truth about them. A young man stands at the edge of the grand canyon. Nothing is wrong with his eyes, they take in all the beauty, all the grandeur, every nuance of light, shadow and color. He turns to his friend and says, "What's all the fuss. It's just a big ditch." As he walks away, something comes up short, something is judged to be wanting, and it is not the beauty of God's world. A person says a lot about themselves by what they worship, what they commit their time to, what they love and cherish, what they disdain and hate. I don't like these prickly Bible verses, but they reflect a broken world that we cannot wish away.

**--(How can you bring hope or healing to the world, if you don't address the reality of pain, of shame, of sin, of evil, of wickedness? You can't!)**

I don't like the pain and tragedy that I see in the world around me. I don't like the sin that I sometimes catch glimpses of in myself. (I am good at closing my eyes.) This kind of stuff seems like bad news. I'd rather read the comics, but with the bad news comes the good. Good news begins with an honest recognition of the bad news. I don't think that there is anyone here who has not heard about Alcoholics Anonymous. It is a program that has brought countless men and women back out of the clutches of an addiction that was stealing their lives away. It is only one of many programs like it that help people overcome the evils that ensnare them. They are called twelve step programs. The first step begins with the honest recognition of helplessness in the face of addiction—the recognition that there is evil there, brokenness, helplessness, sin. Frederick Buechner believes that the good news of God's love comes in three parts. The first part is tragedy. Our lives all have their share of sin and brokenness, whether we recognize it or hide it. The second part is comedy. God loves us in spite of that sin. The third part is fairy tale—something too good to be true. In strange and marvelous and surprising ways in which God's love in Jesus Christ transforms us. What is it that brings us to the Love of God? Buechner says, "As much as it is our hope, it is our

hopelessness that brings us to church of a Sunday, and any preacher who, whatever else he speaks, does not speak to that hopelessness might as well save his breath." (Telling the Truth: *The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, page 55) Poisonous snakes and condemnation, poor fare for a Sunday sermon, yet it is as much our hopelessness as our hope that bring us to know God's love.

**--(But let's remember whose side God is on. For God did not become flesh and live in this world in order to condemn the world, but that through that powerful love, the world might be saved.)**

One of my friends said that her favorite Bible verse is not John 3:16 but John 3:17. Let's see. "Whoever does not believe is condemned"? No, not that one. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it." John 3:16 tells that God sent his son into the world. John 3:17 tells why. In this verse the curtain is drawn back and we get to peek into the heart of God. And what do we see? Condemnation? No—no condemnation there. Paul tells us, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Look into the heart of God. You do not find condemnation, you find compassion, you find suffering love, you find a cross. Christ was not sent for condemnation, but for compassion. Not that the world might be condemned, but that the world might be healed. That the world though him might be saved. But saved from what? What is it that we need to be saved from? Do we need to be saved from a God who will punish with utmost severity for all eternity? When Jesus died on the cross, men nailed his hands there, councils condemned him, people mocked from below. There was no repentance. There was no sorrow. There was no promise of amendment of life. Just sheer pain and callousness. Jesus prayed, "Father forgive them." It is into the hands of this God that people will fall when they die. "Father, forgive!" When he was in seminary a friend of mine had a conversation with a classmate. My friend said that it is possible that every human will be saved, and that, barring that, no human will be damned. The person to whom he spoke was indignant and upset. He blurted out, "Then why would anyone be a Christian? " I don't know? Why would anyone want to be a Christian? Why would anyone trust Christ, or love Christ, or believe in Christ, or follow Christ's call? Why would anyone want to be a Christian? Maybe beauty. Maybe joy. Maybe love that is beyond anything that we can begin to imagine. Perhaps we shouldn't ask what are we saved from but, "What are we saved for?" Saved for what? We are saved for a life of joy lived in the presence of God who loves us more than we love ourselves. For service to others. For fulfillment and purpose and hope. God wants us free from all that would drag us down. God desires to put in our hearts the same kind of compassion that is in Christ Jesus. Jesus was teaching about prayer. "What man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? . . . how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" As we move toward Holy Week we can't help but see the evil of the world reflected in the cross, in the brokenness, in the pain. As we see in our own lives that which should not be there, or see the blank space where something should be but isn't, let's remember whose side God is on. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world, through him might be saved.