

Bait and Switch?

John 3:14-21

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

This fourth Sunday in Lent we encounter the most famous verse in scripture: John 3:16. That’s the one we see on billboards, bumper stickers, and placards at football games. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” To be sure, this verse alone establishes the primacy of faith over any rewardable or punishable works. But the rest of the passage that we have in our Gospel today expands on the theme. There are some interesting parts and I would like to comment.

Verse 17: “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” John seems to think the substance of the text is important enough to repeat it in his 12th chapter and they are his most definitive statement on the subject of judgment. From that chapter he tells us that Jesus says: “I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.” It seems that, contrary to all our guilty expectations, God is not mad at the world. Even when God sends the Son to it — the same Son, we are told in chapter 5 whom has been appointed to do all the judging for God: “the Father judges no one, but has given over all judgment to the Son”. And yet this Son, strangely, does not judge, but rather saves. Not only in this verse but throughout the Gospel of John, there lurks the image of a rigged trial, of a judgment at which the judge is shamelessly in cahoots with the guilty world and utterly determined

to acquit it no matter what. There could be evidence of collusion between God and the world. Perhaps we should appoint a special counsel to investigate.

Verse 18: “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” Notice that all the world has to do to escape judgment is to *believe* — for the simple reason that by the gracious work of Jesus, the world has in fact *already escaped* it. The world need do nothing to *earn* that escape, and it certainly need not compile questionable lists of good works to prove that it deserves to escape that judgment. The world need not negotiate with God, or be afraid of God, or try conning God into being lenient. The world has only to believe that God in Jesus has settled all the problems of sin and to laugh loud and long at how graciously easy the whole business always was. But for those who do *not* believe — who will *not trust* the gracious order of the universe revealed in Jesus, who go on insisting on responsibility and accountability and all the other dreadful, losing subjects with which the world beats itself over the head — for them, there is deep trouble. For they have been judged and condemned already by the very fact of their refusal to believe in the non-judgment already pronounced — in the non-condemnation under which they actually stand — all of which, except for their stubborn faces, they could be enjoying free of charge.

Verse 19: “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” Yes, Jesus says; there is a judgment, and that judgment still stands because the law and the prophets I came to fulfill still stand. There is a judgment because the law remains forever your beauty, and when I come to you in my fulfillment of all its righteous demands, I will make the ugliness of your disobedience look a thousand times worse. But *I* do not judge you. You judge yourself by taking your stand on the law’s demands rather than on my righteousness which is yours for the believing. I do not condemn you. The law does; but I have lifted the curse of the law and given you a yoke that is easy and burden that is light: all you need is simply to trust my word that I do not in fact condemn. But if you insist on running from the light of that word into the darkness of your own guilt — if you will not come to me and let me transform your ugliness into my beauty; if you fear my beauty because you dread its contrast with your ugliness — well then I cannot help you. Or, better said, you cannot receive the help I have already delivered to you because you choose not to trust my assurance that you already

have it. I wish we could do business, Jesus says; as a matter of fact, I have gone ahead and done all the business that needs doing. But as long as you keep yourself out there in the dark, my doing of it might just as well never have happened; I have put a billion-dollar deal in your left hip pocket and you won't even move your hand to check it out.

Verse 20: "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed." Out in the darkness of our unbelief, we fear God and we hate God. Because we will only look at our own ugliness and not at Jesus' gracious transforming beauty, we keep ourselves from the one thing that can save us — that has in fact already saved us, even though we will not trust it.

Verse 21: "But those who do [— — —] come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." Now I have left out three words in that verse. No cheating, what do you suppose they were? What is it that we all, sitting in the darkness with our vile deeds, our evil, our ugliness, naturally assume Jesus to have said? Do not you, do not we all, bizarrely expect him to return, at the end of this rhapsody of gracious non-judgment, to the old bait-and-switch offer of which we always suspected him? Are we not, in our guilt, fully prepared to hear him take back grace and reinstate law by saying, "But those who do *what is good* come to the light...?" But what does Jesus actually say? He says, "Those who do *what is true* come to the light...."

Do you see what that means? It means that we can come to the light no matter what our deeds have been. We are not required to clean up our act beforehand, and we are certainly not required to submit proof that the act will stay clean henceforth and forever. We are only required to *do the truth*, to bring our ugliness out of the dark into the light and let the absolving acceptance of Jesus shine upon it. And we are to do that precisely in order that it may clearly seen — by us, please note, because it was we, not God, who were in the dark — that *all* our deeds, good *and* bad, were done in God. Even our sins were committed in the Light who lightens everyone. Even in the moment of their commission, they were absolved by that light. And except for our fearful, groundless hatred of the Light, we could have seen that all along.

Every Christian worship service bears witness to that fact. Sunday after Sunday we come into church with the same list of tiresome sins: our lust, our laziness, our anger, our jealousy, our pride. And Sunday after Sunday we begin our worship by confessing them. Why? What is the purpose of Christian confession?

Is it to present our sins to a God who doesn't know about them, or to haggle over them with a God who might possibly be talked into forgiving them? No! It is only to bring them to the light of Jesus and to see clearly that they were forgiven all along.

In three weeks, on Easter Eve, we will sing the *Exsultet*, the old Latin proclamation in which we force ourselves to rejoice over our sin because it has become the occasion of God's grace — we see it as a *felix culpa*, a happy fault — and to wash away the whole sorry story of the world's transgressions in the absolving blood of the Lamb. The *Exsultet* sings, "O certainly necessary sin of Adam, which deserved to have such and so great a Redeemer."

We have always been home free, lightened even in the house of our sins by the Light of Light in whom they were all wrought. The only thing we do in confession is drag ourselves back in out of the dark that never was.