

Sermon Saint Ann's March 22, 2009

I don't know how many of you have heard of Facebook. Facebook is, at present, the prince among what are known as social networking sites on the internet. On Facebook each person sets up their own individual page which reflects their distinctive attributes and interests. People ask permission to be able to view and comment on each other's pages through a process known as friending. Now, lest you think this child's play, I must tell you that John Talbott has a page on Facebook. And yes, he has *friended* me.

People use Facebook to connect with colleagues and classmates, old and new to share things. From the silly to the sublime. Proud photos displayed, major life events celebrated, birthdays acknowledged—it's a kind of virtual coffee hour, except everyone is invited into every conversation.

But wait, there's more! Facebook has groups. You can join a Facebook group where those who share a common interest or cause can pose questions or post comments about virtually anything, and all are free to respond. For example, John and I are not the only clergy in the Facebook fray. There is a group called "Episcopal priests" that, as of this morning, has 1,034 members.

This makes the Facebook community a treasure trove of commentary and insights, when it comes to preparing a sermon. And because of our blessed Lectionary, we are all preaching the same texts at the same time.

And so as I once again reached into our lectionary cracker-jack box, I was buoyed by my awareness of the multitudes poised to assist me in my homiletical preparations. (To help me write my sermon). I pull out...John 3:16. John 3:16. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him (most of us know the King James) shall not perish but have everlasting life. Whether on bumper stickers or ballgame banners, or written in macaroni letters on popsicle sticks at Vacation Bible School, this verse is ubiquitous. Everyone knows it, Jews and Muslims quote it. It is rumored that John 3:16 has been translated into more languages than any other text. This passage has been studied and preached by...pretty much *everyone* since scribes took pen to papyrus. And now it was my turn, my charge and responsibility to preach, John 3:16. No pressure.

Last year the Saint Ann's theater club enjoyed a common meal and the Ivoryton Playhouse's performance of *Evita*. Today we will similarly caravan to the playhouse to enjoy the musical *Godspell*, and will return to Saint Ann's for an early supper.

So last year, when we were watching *Evita*, and the lead was ramping up to that universally known ballad, *Don't Cry for me Argentina*, I found myself quite concerned for this actress. How on earth would she sing *Don't Cry for Me Argentina* in a distinctly compelling way?

Remembering that anxious moment at the theater, I posted this thought to my Facebook profile, "Preaching John 3:16 is like singing *Don't Cry for Me Argentina*...Help!"

I received a few limp and evasive responses from my “friends.” No help from John, by the way. All seemed to want to skip that old familiar phrase and focus on the next few verses. Several suggested that I preach from the Old Testament, or better yet, the Psalm!

But I had no intention of shying away from this Gospel for fear of sounding trite. I began to look for God’s word for us in this text.

Almost immediately it hit me. My aversion to this passage was not really its ubiquity. No, I was being repelled by its devastating content. “God sent his only son, that whoever *believes in him* will not *perish*.” For many preachers and certainly all televised evangelists the first part (the part about God’s saving act) serves as a kind of entr’acte to the second. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ functioning as the opening band, as it were, for the featured performer...ME. And if I do not perform well, believing the correct doctrines, I will most certainly *perish*.

How in God’s name am I supposed to reconcile this passage with all that we teach about God’s universal embrace and boundless compassion? If you don’t believe correctly, you perish?

When John 3:17 tells us that Jesus did not come to condemn the world but to save it, we breathe a sigh of relief. But immediately we return to the theme of *our* role in deciding where we spend eternity. Vs.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.”

The Gospel writer had left me with *no* choice, I had to go back to Facebook. I scrolled through responses to my post with renewed fervor. And then, I came across a simple message from a dear old friend and fellow thespian. It said “Janie, the truth is, I never left you. All through your wild days. Your mad existence. I kept my promise, don’t keep your distance,” the refrain from that familiar Evita song.

Suddenly my preachers angst, dissolved. I realized that I too had been focused on me and what I believe and suddenly, there was God and I was reordered.

This passage, is in the Gospel of John. Early in it. And if we look back even further, like to the beginning of the Gospel, we encounter an equally familiar cadence, “In the beginning was the word and the word was with god and the word was god.” God from the beginning. From *the* Beginning—Genesis. God, whose first word was “let there be light.” For *John* the initial manifestation of the incarnation, God on earth, was not *the word was made flesh*. The manger birth was not the beginning of the creation being made new. It was something else. Light.

Lets look. John 1.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into*

*being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."*

In the beginning, God broke through, and there was light. God incarnate, Jesus, the light of the world.

Oddly, the haunting lyrics from that tried ballad seemed to capture John's intention. *The truth is, I never left you.* Christ was and is from the beginning. All through your wild days and madness, God has kept his promise, that light will not and cannot be overcome by any darkness and certainly not yours.

In Lent, this seems an essential counterpoint to our disciplined internal housecleaning. When we ask God to walk us through a holy lent, it can be startling what we find. It is as if Holy Windex swipes our mirrors in moments, flashes of more true self knowledge, clear visions of some of the pain we have caused in our self-preserving, unforgiving ways. Yet if we draw near, and seek to be known and changed by God, we will be held and healed.

In the heart of this Holy Lent, into which we were welcomed on Ash Wednesday, this passage serves not as a condemnation for some, but for an absolute statement of rescue for all. The light has been with us from the beginning. With all of us, no matter what precepts we intellectually embrace. We are talking about life and power that is so much bigger than any of that. How crazy of us, to think that anything any of us do or say or think could in any measure snuff out divine Light. Our darkness cannot overwhelm it. Not even close. Our darkness can overwhelm *us*. But does not and cannot overwhelm the light of God's holy and unfathomable love.

You know, I don't think my friend was trying to help me with my sermon, with his serenade, (*singing*) *the truth is I never left you.* In fact, I think he was trying to distract me, by putting a tune in my head, which would not be easily dislodged. Kind of like I just did to you.

So, since you'll be humming that tune for, at least a few hours, you might as well use it to meditate on the impossibility of *overpowering God's light with our sin.* All through your wild days, your mad existence. He's kept his promise. Don't keep your distance. *Amen.*