

John 3:16 sums up Easter message

WHEN WHAT YOU HAVE is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. When what you have is Lent, everything from John's Gospel looks like Easter.

Next week's passage (John 3:14-21) takes on special depth because we hear it in the midst of our preparations for Holy Week. Our ears expect news about the resurrection, and we are not disappointed.

The entire Gospel for next Sunday comes from a discourse Jesus addresses to Nicodemus. A Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, Nicodemus stands out as the main foil to Jesus in chapter three. He comes at night to pose some questions:

"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born? How can these things be?"

Jesus answers with another question: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

Slowly, Nicodemus comes to faith, but only through the masterful teaching of Jesus. Nicodemus returns at the end of John's Gospel after Jesus has died. He brings 100 pounds of aloes and myrrh for his body (19:39).

Several themes of this passage help us prepare for Easter: the contrast between light and darkness, the difference between belief and unbelief, the Son of Man, the serpent in the desert, and the only-begotten son.

JESUS SAYS the light has come into the world, but people loved darkness rather than light. Evil-doers prefer the darkness, he reasons, because they will be exposed in the light. However, those who love truth will prefer the light so that God may clearly see their deeds.

Surely he alludes to himself as the light of the world. Our entire journey this Lent struggles between darkness and light. We hide in the darkness of our sin, afraid of the light of Christ. But the Easter Vigil will bring its blessed fire. In the glow of the Easter candle we will sing the proclamation of Christ's victory. The darkness of our sin will be scattered if we seek the light of Christ.

A similar contrast separates the saved from the condemned. Jesus says he did not come to condemn, but to save. However, some have condemned themselves already because of the unbelief.

Lent catches us wavering between belief and unbelief. Has your faith moved you to mark this season with fasting, charity and contrition? Or are the weeks passing by like the other weeks of the year? Our complacency with life may be masking a hardened unbelief in the power of God, a power which

has not yet taken hold of us.

The elect (the catechumens chosen from Baptism this Easter) model this passage from unbelief to belief most perfectly. They are turning away from their former commitments and pledging their hearts to Christ. Such fervor finds favor with the Savior of the world.

Jesus also spoke of himself here as the Son of Man. Whoever believes in the Son of Man will have eternal life. This unusual title carries a sense of judgment, an impending return in which redemption, salvation, and destiny shall meet. When the title, "Son of Man," occurs here, it raises the stakes of the discourse. It hints that this serious topic carries ultimate implications.

Jesus fully earns his title of "Son of Man" in his death and resurrection. When we hear the expression during Lent, it points us toward Easter day.

The title foreshadows the crucifixion. This week we heard Jesus predict the cross when he said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

Next week he will say the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness. Don't remember that one? Try Numbers 21:4-9. In the midst of an attack of poisonous serpents, Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole in the desert. All who looked upon it were healed. When Jesus compares himself to Moses' snake, not only does he say he will be lifted up, but he implies that all who look upon him will be healed of sin.

ONE LAST EXPRESSION from next week's Gospel will remind us of our Lenten journey. It is "God's only Son." That word "only" appears in another famous story from the Old Testament. After Abraham saw God's promise unfold with the birth of his son, Isaac, he heard God's voice issue a terrible command:

"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:2). Abraham's "only son" was spared from sacrifice. And Jesus, God's only son, was rescued from death.

No wonder that the second sentence of next week's Gospel has become the single most popular verse in the Bible. You see it advertised at every professional ball game, where fans zealous for spiritual struggle evangelize millions watching athletic struggles. You see it on bumper stickers. You can get it on T-shirts: "John 3:16" ("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").

All these themes point toward that verse. Light, belief, healing, the Son of Man — they all indicate the marvelous, incomprehensible reality of God's love. That love sent life for those who believe. If Lent brings us to repentance, Easter will bring us to love. □

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Fr. Paul Turner



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Daily Scripture Readings

Third Sunday of Lent

Sunday, March 2
Exodus 20:1-17
Psalms 19:8-11
1 Corinthians 1:22-25
John 2:13-25

Monday, March 3
2 Kings 5:1-15a
Psalms 42:2-3; 43:3-4
Luke 4:24-30

Tuesday, March 4
Daniel 3:25, 34-43
Psalms 25:4-9
Matthew 18:21-35

Wednesday, March 5
Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9
Psalms 147:12-13, 15-16, 19-20
Matthew 5:17-19

Thursday, March 6
Jeremiah 7:23-28
Psalms 95:1-2, 6-9
Luke 11:14-23

Friday, March 7
Hosea 14:2-10
Psalms 81:6-11, 14, 17
Mark 12:28b-34

Saturday, March 8
Hosea 6:1-6
Psalms 51:3-4, 18-21
Luke 18:9-14

Fourth Sunday of Lent
Sunday, March 9
2 Chronicles 36:14-17a,
19-23
Psalms 137:1-6
Ephesians 2:4-10
John 3:14-21