

John 3:14-21 *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

14 In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up - **15** and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life. **16** "This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. **17** God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. **18** Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him. **19** "This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. **20** Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. **21** But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is."

Rev. Joshua D. Rinas

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St. Paul & Immanuel, Blissfield, Michigan

When the pandemic started last March and the reality of lockdowns and the advisements to keep distant from others set in, I looked for the opportunities arising in the midst of all the shrinking. I worked on the house. I worked in the yard. I tried to prepare for the unknown. I listened to news and podcasts looking for insights. We have been very fortunate through the pandemic, but I never came up with any insights that could be leveraged.

As folks have been memorializing the one year anniversary of the start of the pandemic—I must say, that seems like a long time ago.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson went on a camping trip. After sharing a good meal and a bottle of Petrie wine, they retire to their tent for the night.

At about 3 AM, Holmes nudges Watson and asks, "Watson, look up into the sky and tell me what you see?"

Watson said, "I see millions of stars."

Holmes asks, "And, what does that tell you?"

Watson replies, "Astronomically, it tells me there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Theologically, it tells me that God is great and we are small and insignificant. Horologically, it tells me that it's about 3 AM.

Meteorologically, it tells me that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Holmes?"

Holmes retorts, "Someone stole our tent."

While it may not have cost much for Dr Watson to miss the obvious, it can cost us everything, if we miss out on basic lessons we are offered by the world around us.

One of the most famous verses of the bible—or at least the one that appears most often in sports stadiums—is contained within this passage. It's easy to focus on and also assume we know inside and out. But just like Watson who sees the lights in the heavens—we might be missing something right before us—or missing what's absent.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." In hearing this, many focus on what there may be in store for life after death. Yet, in doing so, we miss the fullness of life being offered to us in life before death.

The monologue we have in this passage comes out of a larger conversation Jesus has with Nicodemus. Rev. Aday writes, "Nicodemus comes "by night" to ask Jesus, "the light of the world," a question. He wants to know how to be born again, how to be born from above, how to experience a spiritual rebirth. And Jesus tells him, "God so loved the world... God already gave

you the fullness of God's love. God did not send me to condemn you but to offer you this gift of life!"

Carla Aday continues, "The word *life* or *eternal life* repeats some 30 times in John's gospel. Sometimes it refers to life after death - an extension of life. But often it refers to the life that we have access to on this side of the grave. A whole new realm of living is possible. Nicodemus is trying to figure out the one, two, three steps to the spiritual life. But Jesus tells him, God has already issued the invitation."

Eternal Life - εχη ζωην αιωνιον (eck-ay zo-ain aionion)

There are some complications with the translation of the phrase rendered "eternal life" in this passage—at least as found in the NRSV printed in your bulletin. You may remember that in the version I read from this morning, *The Message* by Eugene Peterson, the phrasing is different, "whole and lasting life." Despite translation difficulties, it is clear that the life we are invited into starts in the here and now, immediately.

Rev. Carla Aday shared a story of how one man faced a choice in his life. "Dr. Jay Wellons is a pediatric neurosurgeon. He shared this story in the *New York Times* about a year ago. He was a doctor, a young doctor in his first year of practice in Alabama, when he got a page about a 9-year-old girl who had been in a car accident some 100 miles away. She had a brain injury and needed immediate surgery. The ER doc in the neighboring town didn't have the ability to tackle such a complex surgery. Dr. Wellons was annoyed. "Why don't you already have her in the air?" The ER doctor explained that the weather was too bad, the helicopters couldn't fly. It would take too long to transport her by ambulance on the ground. She would not survive if they moved her that way. Dr. Wellons took a deep breath. It was time to make a choice. And then he said, "Are those Blackhawk helicopters still stationed at the base near you? You know, those guys will fly in anything." Suddenly things were set in motion. Dr. Wellons prepared the operating room. The ER doctor called in the Blackhawks. And 30 minutes later, the 9-year-old girl arrived. The doctor performed the surgery. It was pretty straightforward, and the girl lived with only minor complications."

“Over the years he followed her case. He watched as she won a beauty and talent competition. She graduated high school. She went off to graduate school later. He always enjoyed receiving Christmas cards from her or letters from her parents about her progress. And then one day, he received a hand-written invitation to her wedding. And his mind flashed back to that 9-year-old girl on the operating table. He realized how often she had inspired him to make the right choice as a doctor. He said, "All of us need a living, breathing reminder to just keep pushing on."”

Amen.