

4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN LENT  
March 18, 2012

# God So Loved the World

FIRST UNITED

METHODIST CHURCH

*An Open-Spirited Community of Faith and Action*  
Larry Moffet, senior pastor



*The Lord is my Shepherd, I'll not want...you prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies Psalm 23:1, 5*

Today I have a complicated sermon. It does come right from the heart. First let's start dealing with the Old Testament passage by saying how lucky we are: In this part of Nebraska we have no poisonous snakes.

Just a little west there are prairie rattlers. I grew up just two hours south and we had three kinds of poisonous snakes to watch out for: copperheads, water moccasins, and timber rattlers. Look before you wade in a creek. Pay attention when the grass moves. Listen. That rattle is a warning. "They are just as afraid of you as you are of them..." Right.

I do not for one minute believe God sent snakes to bite those wandering children of Israel. God may have wanted to. What complainers: "[we detest this miserable food.](#)" They were talking about "manna" – the sweet nutritious food they did not have to buy, grow, or even walk very far to get.

This story tells us an eternal truth. It is easy to forget who we are and whose we are. It is easy to start complaining about things that don't matter.

It is easy to get distracted and fail to pay attention to real dangers. I believe the people were so distracted by their own complaints they weren't watching for snakes on edges of their community.

**So God tells Moses and the people:**

**"Look at what frightens you.**

Look at what can do you harm. Be mindful.

Look at these snakes and learn.

What about the Gospel? --

**<sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,**

There is a cost to redemption. It is all grace. And there is a cost. Often I say "it is about love not blood." And the cross is scary.

Let's pay attention to some scary things in our culture. Brent spent a grueling week in all-day rehearsals for a Community Playhouse spring break production of "Godspell" with actors 7–10 years old. He texted me, "These kids know all about hellfire and damnation. They don't know about resurrection.

**Why? Blame video games? Violent movies? –  
It's bigger than that.**

The truth is that even if people don't go to a judgmental church, they latch on to the old images of damnation. Why? So many live with the sense that they are skating on the edge, that they are one step away from not making it, one step away from losing it, one inch away from being a failure.

Our consumer takes over and tells us that if we have this product or that consumer good we will feel better about ourselves. We become consumers.

Then we start to treat others around us like products."

The truth is we do know judgment. We judge ourselves. We judge others.

What is the remedy? Moses had one answer: look at what frightens you. What scares you needs to be noticed and stared down. Pay attention.

Jesus took that idea and added self-giving love. Something new happens. The serpent was lifted up on the pole, so will the Son of Man be lifted up.

Jesus came proclaiming an eternal truth: God is so totally in charge that even the worst that can happen becomes a pathway for redemption:

**<sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,  
<sup>15</sup>that 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.**

“**God so loves the world!**” it is ok to take that as something very personal.

It is. God loves you. God sees you as so much more than you see yourself. God knows the wonder and the beauty of you. That deep personal love for you that God has shines in the words of **Psalm 23:**

**You prepare a table before me I  
in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint me [as if I am royalty].  
My cup flows over. . .**

“**God so loves the world**” is very personal. It is also so much more:  
God so loves the community. God so loves the whole world.  
Everybody.  
God so loves the whole cosmos.

**God did not send the on into the world to condemn the  
world...**

Lent Class is reading a book that tells us we are citizens, not consumers.

We are Citizens of Grace, not consumers of Grace.

Consumers think nothing is ever enough. Not even manna.

Citizens are full participants. Citizens work for the common good.

How I wish we were as good at seeing ourselves as Citizens of the Kingdom as we are at seeing ourselves as Citizens of this Community.

I was at an amazing ball game Thursday: stolen bases, a stand-up triple, and inside the park home-run. The most amazing thing happened in the 8<sup>th</sup> inning. The relief pitcher got in trouble. Bases were loaded. He pitched his way out of it. Behind on the count, 3-0, he threw strikes. The inning was over. Team and fans erupted in praise. The pitcher hung his head as he was greeted at the dugout. I was sitting next to a baseball coach, Mike Sterns, who said “Look how wise our coach is. He left the relief pitcher in the game. He in effect was saying “figure out how to get out of this situation. You need to work it out. Sometime I may need you to step in a

game and get us out of situation someone else put us in and you will remember you were able to get us out of this situation.”

To use the Biblical image of the day, the pitcher stared at what scared him.

I know you are expecting me to say “God left Jesus in the game...” The truth is better than even that... God is leaving you in the game... It gets better: the game is won. Every time you look at a serpent on the stake you know, yes there is danger, and salvation comes, even through what scares us most. God works through everything – good and bad.

Now let’s claim the full power of the “God so loved the world” verse. This is not just about our individual salvation. God is moving for the whole world’s healing and salvation. We are invited to be channels of God’s gift of salvation!

**So this week, take a few moments. What scares you?  
Stare at it.**

**Moses would be proud. Be attentive  
to the dangers around you.**

**And then take a deep breath, and say “thank you, God.”  
Realize first how precious you are, how much God honors you,  
and then let it sink in:  
that even the scariest things in life are a means of grace.**

**Look, and live! God so loves the world...**

A young man entered a monastery where monks keep total silence. Members were permitted to speak only two words per year to the abbot.

At the end of year one the young man appeared before the abbot and spoke his two words, “bad food.”

At the end of the second year the young man appeared before the abbot and spoke two more words, “hard bed”.

At the end of year three he came to the abbot and spoke his last two words, “I quit.”

The abbot responded, “Well it is about time.”

Complain, complain, complain - that’s all you’ve done since you came here.”

**GOSPEL JOHN 3:14-17**

**<sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,  
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,  
<sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.  
<sup>16</sup>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.  
<sup>17</sup>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.**

*God So Loved, He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity* by Kelly Kapic:

God created a good and perfect world, but the world turned from him.  
God brings restoration through gift: God loves the world and gave the Son, and God and the Son pour out the gift of the Spirit into the hearts of humanity, bringing about new creation.

In other words, the Gospel is shaped by giving:  
God's generosity buys us out of bondage  
and brings us into all the blessings of belonging.  
The good news is not only that God has made us  
to be recipients of his grace

but also participants in the movement of Divine justice and generosity.  
Living in God's gifts, Christians discover they are free to give themselves.

The cross and resurrection of Christ come to shape and define  
this new life of faith, hope and generosity—  
a life that is best lived not in isolation but as a community.

A special relationship exists between divine generosity  
and concern for the poor and oppressed.

We can't stop with discovering the immensity of God's grace.  
We are called to enter into the flow of divine generosity.