

Sunday March 10, 2024

First Lesson: Matthew 11: 28-30

Gospel Lesson: John 3: 14–21

Sermon Series: Enduring: Belief

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

- Good morning Beloved Community!
- Today we are continuing with our Lenten sermon series Enduring.
- Every week leading up until Resurrection Sunday, which lands on March 31 this year, our Lenten journey will be a time of engaging a new spiritual growth opportunity to talk about and learn from so that on that great Resurrection Sunday, we will be able to look over our time together and celebrate the liberation that has come as a result of us doing this vital work together.
- The topic we are invited to endure this week is the topic of Belief.
- I want us all to wrestle with the question, “What are we called to believe?”

- **What are we called to believe** as the United Methodist Church?
- What is our belief as individual members of a global modern society where spirituality and religion have continued to evolve in response to changing societal norms, values, and individual needs?
- Beginning with unpacking this question as it relates to the Methodist Church, I will rely on the opening clip of the Lion King that we just watched, to approach our gospel this morning.
- For when the gospel of John opens up with v14: And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,  
 15 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; I wanted to share with you all this morning that the Lion King imagery of Simba being lifted up before his soon to be inherited kingdom, is the image that comes to**

my mind when approaching this story...but with a twist...

- Therefore if you would like to learn what the twist of this sermon is, you have to pay attention to the entire sermon.....Amen!
- To give some background of what is occurring in our gospel this morning,
- In this passage, Jesus is making a reference to an event from the Old Testament, specifically from the book of Numbers.
- The incident is recorded in Numbers 21:4-9, where the Israelites were grumbling against God and Moses in the wilderness.
- As a punishment, God sent venomous snakes among the people.
- When the people repented, God instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole.
- Those who were bitten by the snakes and looked at the bronze serpent would be healed.

- Jesus uses this historical event as a metaphor for his own upcoming crucifixion.
- By saying, "so the Son of Man must be lifted up," Jesus is referring to his own crucifixion on the cross.
- The act of being "lifted up" symbolizes both the crucifixion and, in a broader sense, the exaltation that follows the resurrection.
- Similarly in our Lion King clip, Simba is raised up before the kingdom because he is being presented as the future king, the heir to the throne.
- The presentation of Simba is a significant moment in the circle of life, marking the continuation of the royal lineage.
- This tradition reflects the natural order within the Pride Lands and symbolizes hope for the prosperity and continuity of the kingdom.

- Simba's presentation, similar to Jesus exaltation is a joyous occasion, celebrated by the animals of the Pride Lands.
- It is a time of optimism and anticipation, as the young lion is expected to grow up and fulfill his destiny as the ruler of the Pride Lands.
- However, Simba's journey is not without its challenges.
- His inheritance includes both the privileges and responsibilities of being the future king that would have him facing external threats; external threats such as hyenas led by his uncle Scar his archnemesis, harsh conditions brought on by Scar's misrule, all the while mourning his father Mufasa's murder by Scar, all the while trying to fill his father's mighty shoes or paws— to lead the kingdom with justice and courage.
- So in the Lion King film, what is being lifted up before the Pride Land is to believe in Simba as being the

worthy and capable leader that will restore balance to the lands.

- Similarly, in our gospel this morning, what is being lifted up for the Church to consider **is an invitation to believe in the One who has also come to restore balance to our Pride lands.**
- However, I would like to wrestle with John 3:15-16 for a moment, if you don't mind, because our Wednesday Night Class also wrestled with this imagery for some time as well, and I believe I might know why...hence is where the twist that I promised will hopefully begin to unfold.
- When you and I are invited to believe in Jesus, I believe that the imagery that comes to most of our minds is this Lion King image, where we are invited to believe in a noble God like that of a righteous King that will come to the Earth and bring good news that will ultimately preach the gospel to the poor, heal the brokenhearted,

bring deliverance to the captive and provide recovery to sight to the blind. (Luke 4:18-22)

- This idea of the Messiah and the anticipation of a savior were prominent themes in Jewish history long before the arrival of Jesus.
- The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) contains prophecies and promises about a future figure who would be the Messiah, a chosen one anointed by God to fulfill specific roles.
- These expectations varied, and people held different views on the nature and actions of the awaited Messiah.
- Throughout centuries, the Jewish people faced various challenges, including foreign occupations and the desire for a leader who would deliver them from oppression.
- By the time of Jesus, there were different **interpretations of what the Messiah would do**, ranging from a military leader who would liberate the

Jewish people from political oppression to a spiritual figure who would bring about a renewal and transformation of the people.

- When Jesus emerged in the first century, some people recognized him as the Messiah, while others did not, as his teachings and actions did not align with certain conventional expectations.
- Jesus emphasized instead a spiritual kingdom and salvation, addressing the deeper needs of humanity.
- This contrasted with the expectations of a political or military leader that some were anticipating.
- Furthermore, the ultimate twist that comes in this sermon and story, hence why I am proclaiming that this is a belief we must endure, is that what Jesus, who was both fully human and fully divine, came to do, is **to teach and show humanity how one embodies the divinity that we all are created in.**



- When the Bible says that we are all created in the image of God, the ultimate understanding for us to consider is that this creation of us is not merely a theological concept **but a call to action.**
- By living out the Imago Dei, **it is a call to action** to manifest love,
- When we live out the image of the Imago Dei, **It is a call to action** to live out compassion,
- When you and I operate from our imago dei, **it is a call to action** to live out justice.
- Furthermore, recognizing the divine image within ourselves invites a process of self-reflection and transformation.
- It challenges us to align our thoughts, words, and actions with the divine principles of love, kindness, and forgiveness.

- As we grow in this awareness, we become agents of positive change, radiating the light of the divine image to those around us.
- Hence why our gospel today, in verse 17, informs us, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him.
- The sobering reality from my perspective is that so many of us have been condemned, and we need to be saved.
- When reflecting on the three justice initiatives as members of Justice in Action as an example, so many of our community have been condemned to a life of misery and suffering;
- Our community is suffering because they are without resources and education **that will bring relief** in this mental health crisis we are living with;

- **There is no relief** for people seeking affordable housing,
- **There is no relief** for people seeking restorative solutions towards criminal justice....
- Thereby providing an alternative image of what is being **lifted up** in our gospel this morning to consider as we look a little closer at what the latter part of John 3: 18-20 is inviting us to do from a lens of justice;
- For me **it is to contemplate how we might live out our inner divine creation.**
- What is being **lifted up** for us all to consider is that we play a role in the narrative of our lives and it is up to us to choose how we will influence the world around us.
- It is up to us whether or not we are going to shine our light thereby become the light in this broken world.
- Furthermore why Church matters for me, is because the church teaches us how to be the light.

- **Being the light** involves our actions aligning with the principles of fairness, equity, and truth.
- **Being the light** involves contributing to the establishment of a world where justice reigns supreme, that will ultimately dispel the shadows of injustice.
- **Being the light** involves you and I everyday making a choice to bear our gifts through prayer, presence, gifts, service and witness for the transformation of the world.
- Thereby making the twist for us all to consider is that **there is not One** who will wave a magic wand and make all violence, murder, isms and injustice go away —
- However, there is One who will show us how to overcome all of this and choose a better way!
- There is One who shows us how to overcome temptation,

- There is One who shows us how to overcome oppression,
- There is One who shows us how to overcome impatience, self-righteousness, bigotry, hatred, rejection, oppression and even death itself—
- And so it is when you and I choose to lift our eyes up to the hills in which our help comes from, the hope is that this promised testimony of eternal life and awakening will begin to manifest within us— that leads us to this inner assurance that our help truly comes from the Maker of heaven and Earth!

“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

**29** Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

**30** For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”