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Our Saviour/St. Stephen
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Lent 4

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

“The Gospel in Miniature.” That is what Martin Luther called it.

“The Gospel in Miniature.”

And what Luther is referring to is that ever so famous verse John 3:16.

“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.”

That is the so called “Gospel in Miniature.”

In other words, Luther said the entire good news of God in his Son Jesus Christ can be summed up in that verse.

That if we take nothing else from the writings about Jesus, his life, his ministry, his suffering, death, and resurrection...

If we take nothing else from the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—let us remember this verse.

“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.”

That is the Gospel in Miniature.

PAUSE

And there is quite a bit to unpack in just this one verse.

First, what we see here in this verse is that God’s nature, God’s essence, God’s main characteristic is love.

God so loved the world.

God does not despise the world nor revile the world, for God created the world.

And, God does not reject the world, God does not write off the world, just because sin has infected the world.

God does wash his hands of the world, even though the world is plagued by war and violence.

Even though the world is troubled by poverty and hunger.

Even though the world is tormented by disease and anguish.

Even though the world is overcome by grief and sorrow.

Yes, the world has its problems, of that we can be sure.

But even so, it is the nature of God to continue to love this world and love it abundantly.

God so loved this world.

And so, out of love for this world, what does God do?

God gave his Son, which means more than just giving us his Son, but it means, too, that God GAVE UP his Son on the cross for the world.

PAUSE

Now, in short, this is God's grace. It is God's gift. Grace is a word that means gift.

And in this case, it is not just that God gave us his Son.

No, God gave us God's SELF in his Son Jesus Christ.

PAUSE

So here is how we can think of this act of grace.

God so loved the world, and recognizing the state of the world, God rolls up God's sleeves and God gets down to work.

And this work of caring for God's world would not be easy. It would not be nice and neat, tidy work.

No, this work of caring for the world is messy, it's difficult, it's downright demanding.

For what does the work require of God? That God come into the world itself.

And again, we can talk about God giving his Son that we might be saved.

But in truth, it is God's SELF in Jesus Christ that comes into the world and it is God's SELF that dies on the cross.

That is how committed God is to this work.

This work is not easy. Not simple.

And so, this is what it means that God so loved the world.

That is pretty remarkable if you think about it.

To make a creation and then to step into that creation.

It is somewhat akin to a human being making a stage set and then walking onto that stage set.

But no, it is really not the same at all.

For here we are talking about God taking on humanity, becoming a human being.

Here we are talking about the incarnation. God becoming like us and then being among God's creation.

No, that is entirely different than a set designer building a stage and then becoming a character in the performance that takes place on that stage.

Not the same at all.

God gets down to the messy work of caring for this world.

God rolls up God's sleeves, and God enters into the messiness of this world.

But it is not enough just to become a human being.

No, but God now ministers to the human beings he created.

God interacts with people that are sick and diseased.

God interacts with individuals who are outcasts and pariahs, the unrighteous, the depraved.

God interacts with persons towards whom the world is indifferent.

God interacts with persons whom the world scorns.

God cares for them, cares for us. God extends his compassion, and his mercy, and his love.

This is God rolling up his sleeves. This is God getting knee deep in the messiness of life.

But even this is not enough.

It is not enough to become a human being.

It is not enough to interact with other human beings, especially the human beings who are shunned and despairing, those infirmed and sickly, those destitute and helpless.

No, God rolls up his sleeves further and really gets into the real messiness of life.

For what does God do next?

God, the Creator of the Cosmos, the All-powerful, the All-knowing, the All-encompassing God becomes the lowest of servants, whereby he takes our place on the cross.

God dies on the cross in utter humiliation and amidst great suffering.

God dies in our stead.

God dies.

This is how much God so loved the world.

This is the commitment God has to this world he has fashioned and made.

This is God's unbelievable commitment to each one of us.

That God will come into this world, that God will minister to its broken human beings, and finally that God willingly gives up God's own life for us.

God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.

God so loved the world, that God himself dies for us.

PAUSE

But here is where theology gets tricky, right?

God dies, so how is God raised?

Did just the human part of Jesus die on the cross, but the God part of Jesus survived, so that God raised just the human?

Or, did in fact the whole of God in Jesus Christ, both human and divine, die on that cross so many centuries ago?

PAUSE

The answer has to be the latter, that God's self—both human and divine in Jesus Christ, died on the cross.

Otherwise, there was no risk involved in God coming into the world and no risk associated with being crucified.

And we would be left asking ourselves, "What kind of love is that where there is no risk?"

True powerful love means being vulnerable for another.

And so yes, love entails risk. And great love entails great risk.

So yes, the whole of God dies on the cross, and make no mistake about it that is the risk that God takes for us.

That is the great love God has for this world and for you and me.

That God allows God's self to be completely vulnerable.

PAUSE

But again we ask...

How is it then that God is raised? If God truly dies, who is there left to resurrect God?

And like I said, "This is the tricky part."

What I believe is that the power of love itself is that which makes the resurrection possible.

How exactly that works I don't know.

But God's Love is so powerful that even God's self is bound to its power to restore life.

And so then, all this of which we have been speaking—God's incarnation, God's ministry in this world, and God's suffering and death—all this represents the abundance of God's love.

God so loved the world, that God gave God's SELF.

PAUSE

So, to be sure, when God dies on the cross on Good Friday, God took a great risk out of love for us.

And it is this same love which raises God on Easter Sunday.

And in so doing, God's love swallows up death forever, and we, Friends, have the promise of new life.

PAUSE

So yes, God rolled up God's sleeves and God got down to work for us in the messiness of life and death.

And this verse from John 3:16, sums all that up.

It is as Luther says, "The Gospel in Miniature."

It is as if the word spoken from this text, can't help but accomplish what it says...That is how God's word is understood.

The Word is spoken and it goes forth and does not return empty.

The Word, that is, God's love in this text goes forth and accomplishes what it is set out to do, raising God in his Son Jesus Christ from the dead, and in so doing, revealing the abundance of God's love for the world.

PAUSE

And so all who believe in Jesus Christ will not perish but have eternal life.

All who believe that God's love CAN accomplish, DOES accomplish what it says, and even us, we, too, who believe are caught up in the power of that Word of God's love...all who believe are rescued to from the pit of death.

PAUSE

Finally, we must conclude that love is the most powerful, most POWERFUL of forces at work in all Creation.

We might think of love as the very fabric of the cosmos.

Love is that which surrounds and permeates all things.

And love is that which has made us, that which has saved us, and that which will sustain us unto everlasting life.

Thanks be to God for the LOVE of God.

Amen.