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Lent IV
18 March 2012
Grace and Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Jn 3:14-21

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

What is *faith*?

Or, what does it mean *to believe*?

We're in the beginning of March Madness right now,
and I was one of those who *believed* in Wichita State.
A lot of good that did me!

People tend to *believe* in their sports teams,
they believe in their exercise routines or diets,
they have faith in their home remedies and their grandmother's recipes.
They believe the economy will turn around.

But what does it mean to believe?

And when we come to religion—
lot's of belief talk there!

While Muslims believe in Allah and Hindus in Brahman, or the universe,
atheists believe in natural selection, and many today believe it's best,
to believe in whatever you want.

We've come to a point where faith for faith's sake is good enough.
Just as long as you *believe*.
The old song George Michael song said the same,
"You've just gotta have faith."

But faith in what?
What does it even mean?

And if you say, "Faith in God,"
well that doesn't help all that much either!

Very few people vote against God.
If you sit in Starbucks or have a conversation with the barber, you'll find most believe in god.

And when something tragic happens you'll hear this unfortunate saying:
"Just keep believing." Or, "Just have faith."

But faith in what?
That the universe will work things out?
That the IRS will stop demanding taxes?
That tornados will stop landing on houses?
Or that I'll figure a way out of this mess?

That's the problem with faith, or at least, faith for faith's sake.

Christians don't "just believe."

They don't "have faith" in general.

They have faith in something specific.

Our faith has an object, or better yet, a subject, a person, an event!

In John's short Gospel reading this morning He uses the word *believe* five times.

But every time he does he adds an object:

"Whoever believes *in Him* may have eternal life" (Jn 3:15).

"Whoever believes *in Him* should not perish but have eternal life" (3:16).

And again,

**"Whoever believes *in Him* is not condemned,
but whoever does not *believe [in Him]* is condemned already,
because he has not believed *in the Name of the only Son of God*"** (3:18)

Faith is always *in* something.

And because faith is always connected to a something,

there's true faith and false faith—

just believing doesn't get you anywhere,
what you believe has to be true.

To illustrate this John recalls one of the great Old Testament stories: The Bronze Serpent.

You remember how it goes:

The Israelites were getting sick of this Manna,

they wanted something more, something exciting,

so they complained to Moses and grumbled against God.

This didn't make God very happy—

they had rejected His miraculous gift of Bread from heaven,

and with that, rejected Him as the God who would provide for them all that they
need to support this body and life.

So God sent among them serpents, venomous serpents,

and if the serpents bit anyone, they would die.

This caused the people to confess their sins, to cry out to God for mercy, to save them!

So God commanded Moses to make a serpent of bronze and hoist it up on a pole—

"if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live" (Num 21:9).

Now when it says *look* that means *believe*.

Believe in the promise attached to the serpent lifted up on a pole.

It doesn't mean you've got to look really hard,

or see it in just the right light,

it means: Look at the serpent lifted up and believe the promise of God.

And this is the point.

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever *believes in Him* may have eternal life” (Jn 3:15).

Jesus is the Son of Man who was lifted up on the pole of the cross.

And if anyone looks to Him,
if anyone *believes in Him*, they will be saved.

But to have faith anywhere else, in anything or anyone else,
is to remain with the venom of sin still infecting and killing you.

For Christians, faith is always *in Christ*.

In Him, in His name, in what He has done *for you*.

Then, and only then, does John 3:16 make any sense.

“For God loved the world *in this way*, that He gave His only Son, that whoever *believes in Him*, should not perish, but have eternal life” (3:16).

Our faith, our belief is in Christ—

who He is and what He has done for us.

And what has He done?

He has given Himself for us.

He took on our flesh and became one of us.

He was rejected, beaten, scourged, mocked, and sentenced to death on a cross.

He stretched out His hands for the nails to pierce Him.

He wore the crown of thorns, giving His blood to flow for us.

He suffered, died, and was buried.

And on the third day, having descended into hell He rose again from the dead!

He ascended into heaven and now sits at the right hand of God the Father,

doing His work of redemption still among us today.

He feeds us with His precious body and blood;

He nourishes us with the preaching of His Word;

He comforts us in our pain and sadness;

He is truly God *for us*—

because in Him we have the forgiveness of our sin.

And we believe that this crucified and risen one will come again!

That He'll wipe away every tear from our eye, and bring us to life everlasting.

That He'll remove all our false faiths, false beliefs, and false trusts.

We believe in Jesus.

That's who God is for us.

Without this Jesus,
more than that, without this Jesus lifted up on the cross for us,
we wouldn't have eternal life;
we'd be lost and condemned—we'd perish.

So thank God we have an object of our faith—
something, or better, someone to believe in—
Jesus Christ crucified for us.

And by looking at the cross with Christ's lifeless body hanging on it,
you can know for certain that God loves you.

“For God so loved the world [and that means you!], that He gave His only Son *for you*.”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit