

This is one of those good news, bad news Sundays, at least for preachers. Here we have the text in front of us which includes quite arguably one of the best known and certainly the most memorized portion of the new testament: 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.”

You see the references at sporting events—remember that guy in a rainbow wig holding up a sign, and didn’t Tim Tebow once have it written on his face? It’s on bumper stickers and coffee mugs, refrigerator magnets and t-shirts. Some say it’s the best summary of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the gospel in a nutshell. Whether you agree with that or not, you have to admit, it’s everywhere.

But it also comes from somewhere, has a context, is part of a larger story within the Gospel of John. It relates to the parts that come before it, leads into the parts the follow it, builds on the themes and the narrative and the overall message. Jesus says these now famous words to Nicodemus, a religious leader and member of the Jewish council, a would-be follower of Jesus, someone who came to him in the dark of night looking for answers. Jesus tells him about eternal life, about being born anew or re-born from above. He draws on this image of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness—an image Nicodemus would have known well. He speaks about being lifted up himself, in order to draw people to him, in order to save them. That’s where this now famous verse comes in: that God loved the world enough to send Jesus—not to condemn the world but to save it.

And then he brings it all to a finish with the idea of Jesus being the light that has come into the world, but that some people, for whatever reason, prefer the darkness to the light. Lifted up to bring new life. Sent to save not to condemn. The light that has come into the world—an even so, some people prefer darkness.

My family and I lived in Senegal for over 9 years, but the last six months were the darkest. Senegal, like many developing countries, struggled delivering basic services like electricity. Limited financial resources, aging infrastructure, and a fast-growing middle class meant that supply had hard time keeping up with demand. Power cuts were some much a part of life that you always had a back-up plan—which depending on your means might include either a generator and solar panels, or flashlights and candles. When we arrived in 2002, we could count on at least two or three power cuts per week, maybe more during the hot season, each one lasting maybe two or three hours. But by the time we left in 2011, power cuts were daily, sometimes *more* than once a day, and often lasted five, six, even ten hours or more.

Of course we adapted—we had to adapt. We had candles strategically placed around the house. We kept our laptop fully charged when the electricity was on. We had a

system for heating up water on the stove to warm up the bath. And best of all, we each had these great camping flashlights attached to headbands—so that we could have our hands free to cook, do dishes, read a book, do homework, whatever. A friend who visited us during this time of frequent, lengthy power cuts said that being in our house, each of us with our headlights, was like living with a family of coal miners. I can't say we preferred the darkness, but we were certainly used to it.

But the darkness we experienced in those last six months or so was not simply this physical darkness that came with power cuts. Big changes were happening within the ELCA mission community in Senegal, as we began to work more closely with the Lutheran Church in Senegal and accompany them in their ministry. Knowing I'd be handing over the work I had been doing to Senegalese leaders, knowing, too, that we were leaving, we began to grieve in anticipation of this change. Sure, it was exactly as we planned, we knew this transition was coming. But that didn't make it easier.

Certain decisions that were made by the new leadership were hard for us to take—they seemed to us to *undermine* rather than build on some of the work we had been doing. The carefully crafted handover of our development work to an intentionally interfaith leadership team of two co-directors—one Christian, one Muslim—never gained the approval it needed, and eventually led to my friend Aly's departure from the organization altogether, after 25 years of faithful service with the ELCA mission. After accepting women into the pastoral training program, the local church balked at officially approving female candidates for ordination, leaving some of my brightest students hanging in the balance. My role as advocate and champion of so many of these causes was clearly diminishing, and it was hard to always accept the vision of the new leadership, even if I *knew* that that is how it had to be—even if I remembered turning over the reins had always been the plan; that's accompaniment, after all. But at the time, my work felt stuck in darkness in so many ways. I can't say I preferred the darkness, but I was certainly used to it.

On top of that, it was during these last several months in Senegal that my mom suddenly got sick and died. Cancer, seemingly out of nowhere, reared its ugly head and added such a great cloud of darkness to this already dark time. It didn't help that we were five time zones and thousands of miles away, and unsure if we'd ever have the electricity we needed to complete a Skype call. Talk about darkness. Sitting in a dark classroom, leading pastoral students in a discussion of the book of Exodus when my dad called with the news. Sitting in my dark office, unable to return to the classroom after I hung up the phone. Sitting alone on an airplane for about 15 hours of flights from Dakar to Paris, Paris to Atlanta, Atlanta to Orlando. Arriving at my parents' home to be with my dad and brothers, to sit together in a place that was so very familiar in every way except that Mom wasn't there. Welcoming Sarah and the boys to join us in that unimaginable place, that strangely dark feeling place. I can't say we preferred the darkness we found ourselves in during those months, but we were really starting to get used to it.

At the same time, I must have known it now, and I certainly know it now looking back, not all was darkness during that time. Light did shine both in our hearts, Light did shine through that darkness. Quite a bit, actually.

I saw a good deal of light shining in the curiosity, commitment and insight shown by those pastoral students. Light shone through the darkness one day in particular when Anne-Marie—a young woman who knew her calling and excelled in her studies—as she was able to articulate a kernel of gospel promise hidden in the book of Leviticus—Leviticus! Good news right there in the middle of the Law! I saw light shine through the darkness as so many people surrounded us with their presence and prayers, each of them understanding what it meant to lose a loved one, empathizing with how far away we must have been feeling, pitching in to cover both my classes and Sarah’s work as they unquestionably knew we needed to be gone for a while. Light continued to shine through my friend Aly, who though he knew he needed to leave the organization he had helped build from the ground up still felt no ill will toward the leaders of the Lutheran Church, and who remained a champion and a cheerleader for all they work they were doing, and particularly for the interfaith connection he still felt with them. Light continued to shine as we began to say our good-byes and people shared with us what our work, our witness, our life among them had meant to them. An even Senelec, the Senegalese Electric Company, started making some strides: making repairs, embracing alternative energy, limiting and scheduling their rolling black-outs more judiciously and predictably.

Like I said, we didn’t prefer the darkness but we had grown used to it. But all it took was a little light shining through to begin to transform that darkness. All it took was a little light dawning in our weary world for us to no longer feel trapped in that darkness. Which brings us right back where we started—to the context of John 3:16, and the larger context of the Good News according to John. John, whose gospel opens with images like these: The true light was coming into the world, the light that is the life of all people. Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not, will not, and cannot overcome it. Here’s the gospel for today: Jesus is the light that has come into the world, the one lifted up to bring new life. Sent to save not to condemn. The light who shines in our darkness, the one whom no darkness can overcome. AMEN.