If you ever watch sporting events, you’ve probably noticed from time-to-time a person in the crowd holding up a sign that reads John 3:16. You also see it on bumper stickers, and billboards, and various other random places where Christians are trying to get out the message of salvation. It’s probably the most quoted and most referred to line in scripture, and in today’s gospel reading we hear this famous verse which reads, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” This short verse is famous because it briefly summarizes the entire Gospel – it’s about love, it’s about mercy, and it’s about belief in Christ as our Lord and Saviour who promises salvation through his sacrifice on the cross.

It’s a simple message on the surface, but I think it is necessary to take some time to really explore the depths of what is being said.

The first part reads, “*For God so loved the world…*” – we learn in this opening phrase that God isn’t just an indifferent creator who set the world in motion and then left the scene – he created and then remained intimately involved in the unfolding of history, and it shows that he cares deeply about his people – he cares deeply about all of us.

The first reading today from the OT talks about God interacting with the Israelites, trying to guide them through his prophets. The people wouldn’t listen, so out of love, knowing what was best for them, he allowed a foreign army to defeat their army, sending them into exile for a brief time to help them see the destructive path they were on. The Psalm today is the people’s response, praising God for all he has done for them while reflecting back on this time of turmoil – and this sort of story occurs over and over again in the OT, and as we now know, this cycle of God’s love for us manifests itself most profoundly in the sending of Christ his son.

The second part of John 3:16 reads “*…that he gave his only begotten Son*”. And in this short little phrase we have summarized the reason for this Lenten season – to commemorate Christ’s passion, death and resurrection which gains for us eternal life. None of us can gain eternal life by anything that we do – *none of us* – not even the greatest of saints could gain eternal life by any works that they perform. Salvation is a gift freely given which we do not merit in any way, shape, or form – Christ takes all of our sins upon himself, suffering for our sake on the cross to offer a *perfect sacrifice* for our sinfulness to the Father. And that is why we use this Lenten season to prepare ourselves to accept this greatest of gifts. In thanksgiving and in order to respond to this gift, we spend our time in *prayer* and *penance* in order to grow closer to the One who gives us this gift, and to cooperate with his grace.

The final part of John 3:16 is also very important, because it contains the condition necessary to respond to God’s love and accept the gift of eternal life rather than to reject it – and that is, to *believe*. And it reads, “*everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

Although the gift of salvation is freely given, we have to freely *choose* to accept it, and we do this through our faith and belief. Later in today’s Gospel, this choice to believe is explained, contrasting *light & darkness* – those who choose Christ *choose the light*, and those who chose evil, *prefer the darkness*. This idea of believing then goes far beyond an intellectual affirmation of some fact – such as choosing to believe that the sky is blue and then forgetting about it – to believe in Him is having faith in Christ and therefore to trust that his teachings and His sacrifice on the cross are the road map that leads to Him.

And we follow this roadmap by conforming to the light of Christ. To help us understand this, St. John of the Cross compares our souls to a pane of glass. When it is dark, the window looks clean, and we don’t give it another thought. However, when we expose that same window to the light, we begin to see all the smudges and dirt. And this is like life in Christ – by holding our souls up to Christ who is the light, and by extension all that he teaches us in the gospel, we go through the difficult process of seeing where our lives are still in the darkness, which compels us to do what we can to get rid of those smudges in order for the light to shine through more radiantly. We will never get that window completely clean in this life, but belief requires us to make a genuine effort to try – to flee from sin, and to clean that glass with the most miraculous window cleaner of all – the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

As we continue our journey through Lent, Christ calls us today to allow his light to shine into our lives more fully – he invites us to turn away from the darkness of sin, and turn more fully toward him in order that we can more fully experience his love for us. The 2nd reading from Ephesians reminds us that “*we have been saved by faith, and this is not our doing; it is a gift of God*.” However, accepting this gift does require a *choice* – a choice to believe in him, and to allow Christ’s light to push out the darkness and to illuminate our lives so that we an truly go forth, and ‘*Glorify the Lord by our lives*’.

“*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*”