

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV**

### **Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: March 10, 2024, Year B, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Text: John 3:14-21

Title: In Jeopardy?

Focus: Jeopardy is an engaging quiz show which tests players' broad knowledge and quick thinking. Daily Double opportunities and a high-risk Final Jeopardy clue heighten suspense and intrigue. A verse from the gospel reading, John 3:16, has unfortunately been used to exclude people rather than as an affirmation of God's abundant love. May we live with joy in response to God's love rather than in fear of condemnation.

### **Gospel Reading: John 3:14-21**

<sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup>"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. <sup>17</sup>"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup>Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup>And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

### **Good Shepherd Jeopardy from New Member Orientation**

Today we are welcoming 12 folks as formal members of the church. Dale, Kristin, and Becky, all members of our Faith Formation Team, and I have hosted two orientation meetings with dinner, presentation, and conversations to provide a way for people to get to know Good Shepherd and each other. In addition to those who will be formally received as members today at 9 and 11, we have others who participated who aren't formally joining, but who will continue to be active worshipers at Good Shepherd.

Many of these folks have been worshiping with us at Good Shepherd for many months—some for over a year. Some are new to Good Shepherd just in the last few months. Many of them have already found their way to fellowship and ministry groups like the Thursday Women's Bible Study or Eddy House ministry or Men's Breakfast. That they have found their way is a healthy sign of the church—we have many entry points and people who have been around for a while are inviting—and it's a good sign of the initiative and engagement of these newcomers. So, getting to know them has been a pleasure.

## Content from our Get to Know Good Shepherd/New Member Orientation Class:

- We showed our **Good Shepherd 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary video** and talked about the roots of Good Shepherd as a distinctly welcoming congregation.
- **Relationships:** Perhaps the most important part was just getting to know one another through informal conversation and responding to particular questions.
- **Ministry Groups:** We talked about ways to connect with others in fellowship, study, and service groups and about our Ministry Guide which summarizes those opportunities.
- **Lutheran Heritage:** We talked about Lutheran history, theology, and values and shared a booklet called *About Being Lutheran*.

During our second class session together, we tied together some of what we had talked about by assembling quiz questions about Good Shepherd and Lutheran heritage into a version of the game show Jeopardy. How'd you like to try a few questions? (Or, as they are called on the game show, "Clues" and "Responses, which are phrased as a question."

### **Jeopardy Quiz Questions** *Display the full quiz board on the worship screen.*

- **LCGS Trivia for 400:**
  - Welcome to long-time Lutherans, Christians from every tradition. . .
    - What is the start of the Good Shepherd Welcome Statement
- **Lutheran Lingo for 300**
  - LCGS, Holy Cross, Faith Lutheran, and Lord of Mercy
    - What are the ELCA churches in Reno-Sparks
- **Religious Roots for 300**
  - A rite of the Church instituted by Jesus and a sign of God's grace. Lutherans have 2 of these.
    - What is a sacrament.

We had fun putting these questions and discussion topics into a game show format. It made learning fun and allowed us to continue the discussion about what was most interesting to participants.

**If you're a fan of the TV Jeopardy game show**, you know that Jeopardy is a knowledge-based show which tends to attract the brightest people. As a game, the object is to score the most points through quick thinking, being the first to buzz in, and

then giving correct responses. There are established rules which govern play, and you know that their judges are sticklers and don't bend if you mispronounce something or give an incomplete answer or don't phrase your response as a question.

For viewers, in addition to testing your own knowledge, part of the intrigue is the unpredictability and suspense of the game. There are multiple "Daily Doubles" in which a player can risk more. A player can instantaneously swing the game by doubling his or her points with a correct response or dropping one's point total down to zero. As much as that creates suspense for viewers, that high risk has got to be stressful for players.

That suspense continues to the Final Jeopardy clue. Players know only that the clue will come from a very broad category like "US History" and must strategically make their final bet. In the end, as a game, winners and losers are determined.

## Jeopardy and John 3:16

I've spent some time talking about Jeopardy as a game in part because I wanted to let you know we had fun with our own Lutheran Jeopardy version, but also because **I want to invite you to think creatively with me about Jeopardy as a game with winners and losers and this most memorable verse in today's gospel passage, John 3:16.**

- Jeopardy is an engaging quiz show which tests players' broad knowledge and quick thinking. It has defined rules and strict judges. It has tough clues, high-risk Daily Doubles, and a Final Jeopardy clue which determine a winner. Players know the rules and play to win.
- There is likely no more memorized verse from the Bible than John 3:16. You may have learned it in a slightly different translation, but it is

<sup>16</sup>"For God so loved the world that [God] gave [God's] only Son, so that everyone (or whoever) who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

The unfortunate thing about the way that John 3:16 is used by some is that it has been used like a game show to declare winners and losers. It's been used as a rule for some to declare with some arrogance that they know who's in and who's out. **"I am in; I am on the inside. If you don't respond to Jesus in this particular way, then you are out."**

The unfortunate orientation to John 3:16 that many people have is that it is like a game show in that there are winners and losers. The passage has been used by some people who see themselves on the inside as a way to exclude others rather than to recognize God's abundant love.

## John Declares God's Intent

Here's what I think gospel writer John wants to convey: He wants to make God's intent clear: **God initiates the action. God acts first.**

- "God so loved the world . . ." So God took action: God provides Jesus as a sign or indicator of that love.
- The conjunction "So that" or "In order that" leads to the clause that demonstrates God's intention that people would not perish, but be saved. It's God's purpose.
- God's intent is to save, which is first demonstrated by a plain reading of John 3:16 . . .
- And clarified or reinforced by John 3:17
  - <sup>17</sup>"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. God sent God's son to save, not condemn the world.
- God's motivation for sending Jesus is love, not condemnation. God's love is broad and deep and wide.

## What's the Good News?

The good news is God's love for humankind. No matter what we do or what we fail to do, God gave God's son as a demonstration or sign of that love.

**Here's how that is expressed by Presbyterians:** In a contemporary catechism question and response, here's how Presbyterians describe this relationship with God and/or our response to God:

### Presbyterian Response to this passage or dilemma:<sup>1</sup>

**Question 49.** Will all human beings be saved?

No one will be lost who can be saved. The limits to salvation, whatever they may be, are known only to God. Three truths above all are certain. God is a holy God who is not to be trifled with. No one will be saved except by grace alone. And no judge could possibly be more gracious than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

[From question #51] "God is gracious and merciful, and that God will not deal with people in any other way than we see in Jesus Christ, who came as the Savior of the world."

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<sup>1</sup> Presbyterian Study Catechism. Approved by the 210<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1998) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

## **Lutheran Summary of our Relationship with God:**

“ . . . the ‘good news’ of Jesus is that we are loved by God and saved by God’s grace through faith, not by the good things we do.”<sup>2</sup>

### **This reply dovetails today’s Lectionary-designated Epistle Reading:**

<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup>not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

## **Responding to the Love of God** (Responding to grace, not earning favor)

Here’s a brief vignette which I think captures the complex theological pondering or questions about God’s love, grace, salvation, and human response.

This week I helped a church member unload cereal, crackers, and other food items from the truck of his car to place in the Shared Harvest bin in front of the office. He brought a large number of items.

“Thank you for bringing these. . .” I told him.

“It’s the least I can do for a blessed life,” he told me.

This brief exchange is reflective of what we’re saying about this passage.

To frame this in the theological lens of this passage, he is not bringing food and other items for the Shared Harvest bin as a way of scoring points with God to earn his way in, as though he were buzzing in to give his response to a Jeopardy question. This is not a game with points to be won that earn you a place in the Jeopardy Tournament of Champions.

His own brief phrase, said spontaneously without any pointed question preceding it, was simply an expression of gratitude. Something like, “I am grateful to God for all the blessings of life and so I choose to respond with gratitude and a desire to help others.”

Thanks be to God for the love of God made known in Jesus. May we respond with gratitude and faithful living.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, see Robert C. Blezard, “The ‘E’ Word: Why does the ELCA have the word ‘Evangelical’ in its name?” Posted April 6, 2018 at *Living Lutheran*. <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2018/04/the-e-word/>