

This transcript was developed using an AI-based speech to text generator. We apologize for any typos or other errors.

.

“God so loved the world” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (03/10/2024, Fourth Sunday in Lent)

.

Let us pray, Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer, in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we pray, Amen.
I am a child of the eighties, and therefore this image like stirs up a lot of things in me, right?
I am a child of the space race, and I grew up in the era of manned flights, the space shuttle launched when I was a toddler, the very first one in 1981, you were two.
And the last one, right before my 33rd birthday.
And so this idea of exploring space was a part of our civic duty as Americans.
It was built into nearly every piece of entertainment that I consumed as a young person, right?
And they brought this back in the Lego movie a few years ago, but Space Legos, a huge market in the 1980s.
The film Space Camp, this idea that you could go to this camp and learn how to be an astronaut.
We didn't have a VCR by the way when I was a kid, so I literally read the book that was based on the movie, yes Stan, instead of actually watching the movie. This happened with Karate Kid 1 and 2 as well, just so you know.
Yeah, yeah.
It's okay, we later got a VCR, and everything was okay.
And so you might be thinking about a few weeks ago that the US sent its first lunar lander to the moon since the year 1972, before I was born.
The lander called Odysseus after the Great Greek Explorer touched down, but unfortunately one of its legs got caught on something, maybe a rock or a crevice, maybe a boot that someone left behind the first time, and it tipped over.
And so in this state now, it's not able to transmit data or to receive its solar power

from the sun anymore.
It's not at the right angle.
And so it will quickly become just another piece of space junk.
Now as an elder millennial myself, or a young genexor, whichever you choose, I am internet savvy, and I know that the first lesson of the internet is don't read the comments.
However, as a moth is drawn to the flame, I am often drawn to this unhealthy practice.
And if you read the comments under stories on Facebook about this lunar lander, you will see things like the following.
Oh gosh, I can't read that.
Okay, it's okay.
I'll read them to you.
So was the cameraman there already waiting this time to ha ha.
There by the way is spelled THER, just okay.
One is just the laughing emoji with tears.
One says all AI.
One says this trick again, lol, nice try.
And then the last one says show proof of the first moon landing while you're up there.
Okay, you might also remember this, a few weeks ago, Texas Tech's Tyler Owens said at the NFL combined that he doesn't believe in space and other planets. And feels flat earth theories have some valid points.
In 2017, Aaron early wine in the sports illustrated wrote about why athletes such as Curie Irving and a surprising number of others are flat earthers.
Now you may suggest that it's ridiculous to imagine anyone in this day and age could not believe in something so elemental and obvious as the existence of the planets around us or the curvature of the earth.
But all of this in some ways makes sense.
We live in an era in which we have a profound crisis of trust.
We have the ability to manipulate images.
We are continuing along a path technologically in which we may soon not be able to tell what is real from what is artificial.
Maybe we've already been there now for a while, in fact.
And this lack of trust extends to our social and political institutions as well.
If you can't see what the title of this graph is, it's public trust in government and you can just see it's just tanking.
It just keeps going down year after year after year.
And we can find so much information that we can almost always find something damning about any person or institution, anything that is asking for our trust

and belief.

We can always find a reason not to believe.

When I was a school chaplain, I often met students after chapel or after Eucharist and

I would often get comments, something along the lines of, I really enjoyed that service,

but I don't believe in God.

But that was nice.

It was peaceful or something.

And I think what a lot of these students really meant by that.

They were kids who had grown up in church in many respects.

They were drawn to something sort of ritual, some sort of beauty that resembled God, but

they didn't trust everything that that name had come to stand for for them.

And so God became for those students, and I think it becomes for many people today,

just something that is placed alongside in the same category as UFOs or flat earth or ghosts,

just something else to sort of pick and choose and a long line of things that you may or

may not believe in.

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.

Maybe the most famous verse in the Bible, even Episcopalians know this one.

The verse itself has often been used in this way, at least it was in my own background,

in my own experience, to suggest that the salvation of God in Jesus Christ is something

that you have to think your way to, you have to believe, you have to check off a set

of propositions that you agree with.

And the list only seen sometimes to get longer and longer.

Or that you have to do your evidence, you have to do your homework, you have to do your

research and come back with a file full of your belief stuff that you can bring with

you to church.

Evidence that demands a verdict, evidence that Jesus lived in Palestine in the first century

or that the universe was created in just exactly the way that Genesis says it was or that

your salvation, the very salvation of your soul is dependent on how you feel about God

any day of the week, and that if you have a crisis of belief or some evidence comes

along that shakes your belief or even makes you slightly doubt, well, that's it.

You're out of luck.

So what I want you to know this morning is that belief in all the ways I've just mentioned

is not what I think the gospel of John is presenting to us as the path of salvation.

Belief is complicated.

It has a strange and interesting history, but what Jesus says here is a matter of trust,

a matter of our whole self, our whole being, not just our minds, but our hearts, our emotions, ourselves.

It's really about relationship.

The gospel passage that Aaron read just a few minutes ago is not some abstraction.

It happens in a conversation that Jesus is having with an actual person named Nicodemus.

It happens in a context of a relationship.

So the core question here is not whether we check all the boxes, but who do we trust?

Where do we find our refuge?

Where is our solid rock?

Where is the home that every human heart longs for?

And that home is a person, Jesus Christ.

And Jesus is not a concept or an idea, Jesus is a person in whom we trust.

We have trust issues, do we not?

There is so much in the world around us, as I've already said, that is not trustworthy.

People and institutions let us down.

We have trust issues because we see that people often have some kind of hidden agenda.

We always are sort of trying to pick apart what is this person really want from me?

Maybe not a pure relationship, maybe they have some ulterior motive. Jesus disarms all of that.

He disarms us because what he demonstrates is the pure love of God.

There is no agenda, there is no secret, there is no ulterior motive, there is nothing that

God demands or wants from you in exchange for your trust.

God is simply and profoundly in the business of reconciliation, of bringing back into wholeness,

all the things that are broken and shattered.

God's agenda is not hidden at all.

In Jesus Christ, God's agenda is plain to see.

It's the healing grace of God, the pure goodness of God, the unending love of God poured out

for all people.

If you, as I did, learned John 3.16 as a child in the language of the King James version

of the Bible, then you learned this word, whosoever, whosoever,

believe it in him, shall
not perish, but have everlasting life.
I like that word whosoever, this means that anyone and everyone who
places their trust
in Jesus who takes refuge in him, who finds their home in him will not
be let down, will
not be betrayed, will not be taken advantage of, will not be lied to.
They will find rest for their weary souls.
All the dead and decaying places in their lives will be resurrected,
healed, brought into
a right relationship with God in the entire cosmos, as John says, the
whole universe.
This means that no one is ever beyond redemption.
It means that God's love is wider than any of us imagines it to be.
It means that all the times in which we don't believe that we are
worthy of love, all the
times in which we don't believe that we deserve forgiveness, all the
times in which we
dare not hope that there is love, even for us, even, and especially in
those times, we
are loved and upheld.
We cannot fall beyond some imagined point where God rejects us because
God's love is
infinite and bottomless and vast and beyond measure.
Have you ever gotten a passive-aggressive gift before?
Do you know what I'm talking about?
Like, oh, I got you a new baking pan for Christmas, you know, because
your old one looks like
this or I got you a new set of towels because I stayed at your house
last month and I got
you a new piece of clothing to help you and your wardrobe or this
happens all the time.
We get that book, that book that somebody is like, oh, you really need
to read this.
And the agenda is clear when you start turning the pages of this book
and you're like, oh,
man, I'm grateful to God that God's gifts to us are not like this.
God is a good gift giver.
This gift, as Paul says in Ephesians, is to lift this up, to lift this
up out of our
self-destructive ways, to lift this up out of the bondage of sin.
We have this terrible tendency, all of us, to love the things that are
killing us.
It's one of the best definitions of sin that I've ever heard, and I
wish I could say it's
original to me, it's not, but that sin is loving the things that are
killing us.
We choose things that lead to death, not to life.
We choose the things that undo the reconciling love of God rather than
the things that would

further the purposes of God for the worlds.
Now maybe you have received a good gift at some point in your life as well.
This gift means a lot to me.
This is a painting that someone made for me before I left a job in Louisiana where I was a school chaplain, and it's a painting of the chapel there.
This is a good gift from a good gift giver.
It wasn't a hidden agenda.
Someone wasn't trying to get me to think or believe or to act a certain way.
Something that was crafted for me and deliberated over and presented to me in good faith.
There's no quid pro quo.
I wasn't expected to give something back to the person who painted this for me and gave this to me.
It's just extra.
It's just extra joy in my life, extra beauty in my life, an extra token of love.
Something that's brought into your life without you're having to earn it or merit it.
It's not because you deserve it.
It's because the gift giver is generous and kind and loving and wants you to have a good gift.
John says in Ephesians, we are what he has made us.
And as I heard growing up, God don't make no junk.
We are what he has made us.
God makes us and remakes us through the gift of Jesus Christ, the one in whom we trust.
John 3:16, again maybe the most famous verse in the Bible, but it happens within this context of conversation, part of a relationship of trust, what it takes for Nicodemus to show up, even though he doesn't under the cover of night, means that he trusts Jesus.
He trusts him not to rat him out to the synagogue and the religious leaders.
He trusts him to have this conversation.
And in the course of this conversation, Jesus confirms that he is indeed someone who can be trusted and from that trust flows the gift of God's very life, molding and shaping us.
We began this journey in journey with Ash Wednesday, with the reminder that we are mortal, formed of the dust of the earth and that one day we will return to the dust.
And what this promise from John 3 reminds us of in the midst of lint

is that this God
in whom we trust for all things.
We can trust even through and past the shadow of death.
God's creative and sustaining love is too powerful to be defeated even
by death because
Jesus' sacrifice on the cross accomplishes this great victory over the
powers of sin
and death once and for all.
Trusting in that God is life-giving.
It's not like someone dangling a carrot in front of you and saying
that you can have
it if you pray the right prayer or check off all of the boxes.
It's much more like this, like this, like someone feeding you from his
own body and blood.
In saying to you, this is for you, this is a gift, all of this is for
you.
This is why you can trust me because I love you.
I have loved you from before even you were born.
I love you now and I will love you through the darkest time you can
imagine, even the
valley of death.
This is how God so loved the world.
Amen.