

Our Gospel reading proclaims well-known and well-loved promises: Whoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life. John 3:16 is perhaps the most well-known verse in the Bible: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” These promises are nice. I’m not aware of anybody who gets upset at such promises. A person might think the promises are untrue, but nobody thinks that Jesus is being rude.

The mood shifts, however, with what Jesus says next. He says, “Whoever believes in the Son of the God is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” The mood shifts because faith in Jesus can no longer be understood as being optional or inconsequential: If you believe in Jesus, then you are not condemned. If you do not believe in Jesus, you are condemned already. You can’t leave Jesus to the side. Either you are with him or you are condemned by God himself. Whereas John 3:16 is nice and wouldn’t upset anyone, John 3:18 makes people uncomfortable.

I think the reason why this makes people uncomfortable is because this is not the way we do business, and business transactions are the main way that we understand how things get promoted. The salesman sells; he doesn’t threaten. We are used to being enticed and allured. Salesmen who condemned their customers probably wouldn’t be in business very long.

Religion is often—or probably mainly—seen along these lines. There are lots of religions, denominations, and places of worship. They all promote their own versions. It is reasonable, then, to imagine that you should make your choice in the same way you make so many other choices. Take the religion for a test-drive, so to speak. How do you like it? Do you like what it says? With our Gospel reading this morning, for example, you might like what he says at 3:16, but 3:18? Not so much.

And if Jesus fails to seal the deal, whose fault is that? Here, too, our way of doing business affects how we think. The customer is always right. So when it comes to what God is promoting, if a person is not convinced, then it is God’s fault, or maybe the preacher’s fault.

Jesus, however, is not a salesman. He doesn’t share the salesman’s goal of maximizing sales, perhaps by hook or by crook. If you have any familiarity with the Bible whatsoever, then you know that Jesus does not flatter or seek to please his “potential customers.” Jesus doesn’t try to please anyone except his Father.

The good news about Jesus wanting to please his Father is that it is the Father’s will to save sinners by lifting up his Son on the cross. You heard that at the first part of the reading. But this is not some sales pitch. Either you are in the right, and, in fact, that rightness will save you, or you are in the wrong. That is what it means to be condemned. Being condemned is being on the wrong side.

So we are not dealing with a sales situation here. A more analogous situation would be like you being stuck in a burning building. The situation is bad because you aren’t able to get out on your own. But, thank God, a rescuer shows up. Believe in that rescuer and you will be rescued. That is to say, let the rescuer do what the rescuer does, and you will be saved.

But let's say you're a very silly person. Instead of being thankful that a rescuer has showed up, you immediately start judging the rescuer. His uniform isn't ironed and he's got bad breath. Or maybe this would be more to the point: The fireman speaks bluntly: "You can't keep doing what you're doing. If you stay in this burning building you're wrong. You're going to die!" What the rescuer says is just the truth, but you, being a silly person, would say, "I don't like how you're talking to me! I want to make up my own mind, and I don't appreciate you telling me that I'm wrong!"

So also, when Jesus says, "**Whoever believes in me is not condemned, but whoever does not believe in me is condemned already,**" he is simply speaking the truth. He is the rescuer who has come to rescue us from our sin, God's condemnation, the misery of hell, and so on. In fact, there is no other way to be rescued. You can't rescue yourself. Only God can forgive your sins or make you righteous. So when Jesus says that whoever does not believe in him is condemned already, he isn't trying to manipulate or coerce anybody. Think again of that fireman. Is he manipulating the trapped victim when he tells the person that he will die if he isn't rescued? That is a statement of truth, not just an opinion or one option among many.

But there's another thing we should consider, because there are a lot of people who believe it to be the case. A lot of people believe that there is no hell, there is no judgement, there is no sin. Being condemned by God is an old-fashioned idea that most people do not believe in anymore.

So, to use the analogy I've been working with, this would be like a person who cannot see the smoke or the flames of the fire. If you put yourselves in their shoes, you can perhaps see how strange Jesus's promises would be to them.

It would be like you going home today, sitting in your Lazyboy, everything's fine. All of a sudden a fireman breaks down the door and announces, "I'm here to rescue you!" In this situation somebody has to be crazy. Which one is it? Are you crazy or is the rescuer crazy? Is there a fire or is there not a fire? Are there such things as sin, condemnation, hell, and so on, or are these things imaginary so that you have no need to be rescued?

To try to answer whether sin, condemnation, and hell exist, many things could be said. All that I'd like to try to do is point out the smoke and the fire that can go unnoticed so easily. Consider what happens in homes. Look at how husbands harm their wives, and wives harm their husbands. Look at how parents harm their children, and how children harm one another. Children, often deemed to be somewhat innocent, can be terrible to their fellows—a veritable law of the jungle.

Consider the workplace. Employers mistreat their employees. They try to squeeze as much as they can from them while paying them as little as they can get away with. Employees mistreat their employers. They don't work as hard as they can. They don't respect their bosses. The workplace can be miserable with all the backbiting and complaining.

These are our homes and our workplaces—the places we spend the most time in. The one with whom we spend the most time with is ourselves. So many of us are being burned with self-loathing and self-hatred.

All of these signs point to the conclusion that sin is real. Hell is real. The pain is real. These injuries, sicknesses, and crippling effects are not the way that things should be. We were meant to be loving creatures instead of destructive creatures.

What God's enemies would like to convince you of is that there is no alternative. Homes have to be traumatic. Workplaces have to be contentious. Self-loathing is inescapable. It is as though we have to accept this darkness, because lovelessness and misery are unbreakable laws of our existence.

To believe in Jesus means that you vehemently disagree. We don't have to accept evil as impossible to overcome. Evil is destructive of life and happiness. Jesus says that he will give "eternal life." In fact, he has said that he has come so that we may have life, and have it in abundance.

There are two sides that a person can be on. Either a person can be on the side of light, or a person can be on the side of darkness. Either Jesus is supreme or the darkness is supreme. Jesus Christ is the light of the world; the light no darkness can overcome. In Jesus you are saying, "No, the darkness is not supreme. Jesus is the rescuer who saves us from sin, condemnation, and hell."