

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

Are you bored with church, with the Scriptures? Even all the intrigue in the book of Judges that the men are finishing up — Jael driving a tent peg through the temple of Sisera, Gideon's fleece (dew or no dew, that is the question), Jephthah's rash vow that resulted in the death of his daughter, and all the escapades of Samson — these are no match in entertainment value to what we see on the big screen, the little screen, our tablets, and phones. Our itching ears and wandering eyes desire an ever greater entertainment high, and the Scriptures do not suffice for our fix.

Of course, I wrote this before Dr. Kloha's lecture yesterday. And before that, I had sent out yet another reminder to the church workers in our circuit about his presentation, saying, "This [presentation] will be interesting to anyone who is interested in the Bible — that should be all Lutherans." But is it? Or are we bored? And even though Dr. Kloha said that the work of text criticism might be seen by ordinary individuals as "boring," it's not to him, thanks be to God, so that we can have the very best text to work with.

Nevertheless, boredom is a problem, and the problem is not God's. The problem is not with God's word. The problem is with you. It is your sin. Yes, boredom with God's word is a sin.

Some suggest, "It's always the same thing at church." Actually, it's not, but there is repetition. That's helpful. Repetition is the first principle of all learning. But more than that repetition gives us order in our lives. Order is important. God has given us various cycles, without which, our lives would be chaos. The sun comes up every morning;—this morning according to our clocks, an hour earlier— a new day begins. And we're not bored with that. Even the irreligious "*rejoice and are glad in*" the new day (Ps. 118:24).

The rhythms of the week are well known, and I don't know of anyone who doesn't look forward to the weekend coming. Spring comes each year in March with its longer and warmer days, with rains that water the earth and make it bud and flower (Is. 55:10.) I don't hear people saying, "*Oh, it's spring. Ho hum.*" Rather people are excited about it —except for the accompanying allergies.

When it comes to our families, too. We establish ways of doing things, and they are important to how we function as a family. Who does what and when? We establish family rituals at events, and these become important to the family. They're often passed down from generation to generation—doing the same thing. And as individuals, too, we establish rituals—as we get up in the morning or go to bed at night. Athletes have rituals that they go through before and during the competition — basketball players at the foul line, baseball players in the batter's box.

So it is in church. We have our own rituals—weekly, yearly—that we go through that are important to our lives as Christians. We have big feast days that mark time each year: Christmas, Easter, Pentecost are the biggest. We go through seasons of penitence and celebration and growth. Every year the same thing. Every week the same thing.

Some say, “Ho hum!” But, it’s not. In the midst of our rituals, things change. We’re in the season of Lent now. It’s different than the season that preceded it. You can tell by the color on the altar and pulpit. Before we entered this penitential season, we laid to rest our Alleluias. No singing of these during Lent, although it’s okay if you let one slip into your conversations during the season. We do not sing the Gloria in Excelsis during Lent; and starting next week, the start of Passiontide, we’ll stop singing the Gloria Patri’s, too. And the crosses will be veiled in black. But not only seasonally, but in the weekly liturgical framework, things change: different readings, different psalms, different prayers, different hymns.

Which brings me to this week’s Gospel text. It includes the well-known verse—John 3:16. Are you bored with it? I think not! You love this verse, don’t you? I don’t even need to recite it, but I will. . . . *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* And that’s the way many of us like it too, like we memorized it.

Are you bored with it? No! We love this verse, not because it changes all the time. We don’t like the changes! They mess us up. We love this verse, not because it’s rare. If there’s any verse of Scripture that someone could be bored with, it’s surely this one. People put it everywhere. And if you can’t get the verse itself in, just hold up a sign: *“John 3:16”* and everybody knows it. It’s old hat, but are you bored with it? I don’t think so, but if so, repent!

And then delight in it, for it’s a wonderful verse along with the verses that surround it that tell us of the surprising love our God has for us. Of course, that love is found in Jesus. Jesus is all over this text. He is the Son of Man, the only Son, God’s Son, the Son of God. Indeed, that’s a good rule of thumb for your own reading of the Scripture: always look for Jesus in the text. Even in the Old Testament, look for Jesus. As Jesus Himself instructs us, *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me”* (John 5:39).

A second rule of thumb is this: look for the surprise in the text. In our Gospel, Jesus says, *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”* Isn’t that a surprise? Just by reading the account of the Israelites afflicted with those fiery

serpents, who would have connected that to Jesus?! Jesus makes the connection for us: serpent lifted up on a pole—Jesus lifted up on a cross.

What does the serpent represent? Jesus! The serpent, the very thing that has caused mankind such great harm from the beginning as Satan took on this form in the garden, the very thing that was biting and killing the Israelites in the wilderness, is the thing that was put on a pole, that everyone who looks to it is saved. The serpent represents Jesus; or better yet, the serpent was a type of Christ in the Old Testament that Jesus fulfilled in the New. That's surprising, and delightful.

For we know that that's exactly what Jesus did for us. Out of God's great love for us who endure the fiery darts of the evil one that entice us to sin, God sent His own Son to be tempted as we are, yet who remained sinless (Heb. 4:15). Out of God's great love for us, sons of disobedience, dead in our trespasses and sins, Jesus was lifted up on the tree of the cross to perish for us, to save us from the death we deserve by our sinful rebellion, even rebellious boredom with His word, and give us life. Out of God's great love for us, He gave us His own Son, not only to die, but to rise again, that when we look to Him and believe in Him, we might not perish, but have life. Jesus is God's love toward us, His kindness to us. By grace you have been saved, through faith. Jesus is God's grace to you.

Yes, dear friends, that's why God gave us His Son: to shower us with His love and grace. If God had wanted to condemn and punish us, He would not have sent His Son to become a sinner with us. He would not have needed to subject Him to cruel suffering and death by being lifted up on a pole. He could have simply destroyed us as He did the world in the flood. But to save the world, and do it in a just way that did not overlook sin, God the Father would send His only Son and lift Him up on a pole, that all who look to Him and believe in Him might not perish but have everlasting life.

Do you find that message boring? I hope not—not to Lutherans. Oh, to be sure, Jesus may be hard to find in the book of Judges, like He was in our Old Testament reading, until He instructed us — but look for Him. To be sure, the Scriptures may not be as entertaining as movie blockbusters, March Madness tournaments, or video games. Then again, those things don't promise eternal life.

God grant us a renewed zeal to pick up our Scriptures and “hear them, read, mark, learn, and [inwardly digest them] that, by the patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.” Grant us the eyes to see Jesus throughout His word, and to fix our eyes upon Him who is the founder and perfecter of our faith. Grant that we may ever look to Jesus, the Son of Man who was lifted up for us, believe in Him and have everlasting life.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.