The Gospel of John: *Unless*
John 8:21-30

21 So he said to them again, “I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.” 22 So the Jews said, “Will he kill himself, since he says, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’?” 23 He said to them, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. 24 I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.” 25 So they said to him, “Who are you?” Jesus said to them, “Just what I have been telling you from the beginning. 26 I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.” 27 They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father. 28 So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. 29 And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.” 30 As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

My message is entitled, “Unless” and it will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Sad Truth; 2) We Are the World; and 3) Unless.

**I. The Sad Truth**

As we return to John 8, Jesus continues His dialogue with the Jews at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. Jesus recently declared that He was the light of the world, and the Jewish authorities questioned His integrity for making such a claim. Jesus defends His integrity and concludes by saying in vs. 19, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.

This morning, Jesus continues His response to His critics in vs. 21, “I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.”

In this one sentence Jesus summarizes the sad truth about the human condition on planet earth. For those who know neither the Father nor the Son, there is only one end: they will die in their sin. The sin of unbelief…the sin of rejecting Jesus, is a condemnation that will render us “unsavable.” Jesus repeats this sad news three times in four verses. Church, whenever we see that kind of repetition in scripture, we need to sit up and take notice. Jesus has come to save people from the fate of dying in their sins. As Jesus said to Nicodemus: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever would believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Nevertheless, the Jews in Jerusalem don’t get it. Sadly, the Word of God made flesh came into the world, and though “the world was made through Him, the world did not know Him.” John is telling a story here in John 8 that exemplifies what he summarized in John 1, “He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him.”

Church, don’t ignore the emotional nature of this exchange. Jesus is not some cold philosopher or a mere reporter of bad news. Jesus is personally lamenting the hardened hearts of these Jews…this is a heartbreaking moment. Jesus has come to His own people; those who claim to be awaiting a Messiah; those who just sang songs and prayed prayers about Messiah at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles as they have done for centuries…and yet “the people of God” refuse to acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, even as He stands before them in the flesh.
Jesus is lamenting. He knows His time on earth is coming to an end. He is “going away,” and these Jews will continue to seek and await a Messiah who will never come…they will have missed the visitation of God’s Messiah. And though they will seek the Messiah, they will not find Him…and they will die in their sin of unbelief.

Please do not disassociate our 21st American culture from the hard-hearted Jews of the first century. The sad news that Jesus reveals here in John 8 remains the sad news for all human beings on planet earth. Apart from Jesus, we will all die in our sin of unbelief…and that’s exactly what Jesus just said.

Now, let me ask you a question: does that bother you? Does that bit of news at least concern you? I hope so…it should! But look at how these particular Jews respond in vs. 22: So the Jews said, “Will he kill himself, since he says, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’?”

Talk about missing the point! Rather than acknowledging the sober news of their own coming demise, the Jews speculate that Jesus might be suicidal since He said that He was going where they could not come.

Church, learn from this story. There are some things that Jesus says that might cause us to be confused. There are many stories in the Bible that we may struggle to understand. But don’t miss the essential thing that Jesus says over and over again in the New Testament: apart from Him, our souls are in jeopardy! Apart from Jesus, there is outer darkness and gnashing of teeth. Apart from Jesus, we will die in our sin. These statements are not unclear, and they deserve our utmost attention. Sadly, like the Jews in John 8, many of us fail to take the plight of our souls seriously because we are sufficiently distracted by other questions and inquiries. We fail to have any sense of urgency because we assume that we have plenty of time to worry about our eternity…plenty of time to figure things out when we get older…plenty of time to make things right later on.

Don’t be foolish friends. See the tears in the eyes of our Lord, the Messiah of God, the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world…when He says, “I am going away. You will seek me, and you will die in your sin.” Let that sink in. You can seek Jesus now and be saved. Or you can seek Him later when it is too late. Either way, “every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” The only difference is whether you will make that confession on earth or “under the earth” as Paul writes in Philippians 2.

So why are we so obtuse to God’s appeal through Jesus? Why don’t more people place their trust in Jesus? Our Lord speaks to the problem in what comes next, which leads me to my second subheading:

II. We Are the World

Jesus, in His infinite patience, responds to the Jews saying, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.”
Jesus is explaining why He is going away, and why His listeners won’t be able to come with Him. Jesus is from heaven, and He is returning to heaven. Jesus is from the Father, and He is returning to the Father. Mere sinful mortals of this world cannot choose to go where He is going…they have no access…the way is closed to them.

Now, when Jesus states that human beings are “from below,” that doesn’t mean we are from hell! It just means that we were formed out of that which God created…we are of this world. Now, the word “world”…or kosmos in the Greek, is a word that John uses 58 times in his gospel. The word is loaded with meaning for John.

First of all, we know that God created the world, the kosmos, and He created the world through Jesus! That’s what we learned in the Prologue, where we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made…the world was made through Him…”

We know that the created world was originally “good,” as we read in Genesis 1 and 2.

Sadly, however, we know that the world has a significant problem: things are not as they should be due to the fall as recorded in Gen. 3. G.K Chesterton once said there was only one thing certain about man—that man is not what he was meant to be.

In the same way, writes NT scholar William Barclay, “There is only one thing certain about the cosmos; it is not what it was meant to be. Something has gone wrong. That something is sin. It is sin which separated the world from God; it is sin which blinds it to God; it is sin which is fundamentally hostile to God.” In John’s gospel, “the world” represents the created order that was originally good but is now corrupted by sin. In John’s gospel…we are the world.

In the past few weeks we have seen our cities covered up with riots in America and even other cities around the world. Thousands and thousands of people have taken to the streets to protest. They are angry. Why? Because things are not as they should be in the world. People in power have abused their power to kill and oppress other people, often due to the color of their skin. That should never happen…but it happens often. Systemic racism has been taught and practiced in our country for hundreds of years. Generation after generation of white people have been explicitly or implicitly taught to believe that they are generally better, smarter, and morally superior to Native Americans, blacks, and other people of color as evidenced by cleaner neighborhoods, better schools, and stronger marriages…all the while failing to acknowledge the savage and inhumane policies of genocide against the land’s first people and chattel slavery of African slaves. Can we agree that genocide should never happen? Can we agree that selling off a mother’s children to strangers to be used as slaves should never happen? Yet these very things happened right here in the good old United States of America…the shining and brilliant example of a “Christian” country.

Church, please do not call the United States a “Christian” country…we are no such thing, nor have we ever been. We are a fallen people along with the rest of the world. Our country, like every other country in the kosmos, has a very serious sin problem, and we misrepresent the
Gospel when we forget our sin and try to justify ourselves as somehow “innocent” or even more innocent than the rest of the world. We are not innocent…none of us are innocent. We are the world…and the world is anything but innocent. The world is condemned by the sin that dominates our history, our policies, our systems, our governments, even our own personal habits.

We are the world…and we are estranged from our Creator. We are the world…and we are covered up in darkness. We are the world…and left to our own devices, things will not get better…they will get worse. The cancer of sin that is so profoundly present in the world is terminal and it is fast growing.

So here is the bad news: due to the sin that consumes us and separates us from our Father, the Creator of heaven and earth, we…the world…will die in our sin. That is what Jesus said in vs. 21, and he says it again here twice in vs. 24, “I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am, you will die in your sins.”

And that leads me to my third subheading:

**III. Unless**

It doesn’t take long to get it. Just watch the news for an hour. Journal your private thought life for a week or so. Travel to a different part of town and see how people of a different skin color live in comparison to your family. Travel to a different country and see how people in slums live differently than your family. Spend an hour with a police officer or a judge or a school teacher or a social worker and ask them to tell you what they have seen that breaks their hearts. Visit the local prisons. Walk through a nursing home; walk through the hospital; walk through Walmart…look in the mirror—and you’ll get it. The world is messed up…and we are the world. No doubt Jesus was accurate in His diagnosis: we will die in our sins…we will get what we have coming to us…and we will get what we deserve.

That is…UNLESS…

Did you hear it Church…did you hear what Jesus said? He said, “You will die in your sins…UNLESS…”

Imagine if you were sitting in the doctor’s office and he said, “You have only one week to live…unless…” I suspect he would have your undivided attention, right? If your spouse says, “Our marriage is over unless…” Whatever she said next would be pretty important to hear.

“Unless” is the possibility of a second chance. “Unless” is an opportunity for redemption. “Unless” is GRACE. There didn’t have to be an “unless” for this fallen world. Justice does not require an “unless.”

But here is the good news of the Gospel: God, who is both perfectly just and perfectly merciful, so loved the WORLD…in all of our disgusting sinful mess…that He gave us His only begotten Son…He sent us a Savior! That whosoever would believe in Him might not die in his/her sin, but inherit eternal life.
Jesus made a way for this corrupt, sin-sick world to be redeemed. Jesus made a way for our sins of the past to be forgiven, no matter how horrific they might be. Jesus made a way for us to be reconciled one to another. Jesus made a way for damned souls to be saved from the “death” they deserve. Jesus came with the offer of “unless,”…and here is what He just said:

For unless you believe that I am (he), you will die in your sins.

I want you to know that the Greek here does not explicitly include the word “he” that we find in the ESV. The word for word translation reads, “for lest you believe that I am, you will die in your sins.” Jesus is using the famous construction ego eimi, “I am;” two words remind the Jews of God’s self-identification to Moses in Exodus 3:14. No doubt some of the Jews would hear this statement as blasphemy. Others want to know more.

The crowd in Jerusalem asks a good question, it is a reasonable question for many of us to ask even today, “Who are you?

Who is Jesus? What is it that we need to believe regarding Jesus? How are we to understand who Jesus is? If the “unless” that rescues us from dying in our sin is believing in Jesus, who is Jesus?

Listen carefully to how Jesus responds.

1) In vs. 25, our English Standard translation reads: Jesus said to them, “Just what I have been telling you from the beginning.” The Greek arrangement of this response in vs. 25 is actually punctuated with a question mark, and the word for word translation is awkward: it reads “That which from the beginning so I say to you?” It’s a very difficult phrase to translate, which means it was likely a local expression that people in the first century would have understood better than we do. The ESV translation captures the gist of it: Jesus is pointing back to His words. We come to know who Jesus is by reading and hearing His words…by hearing and reading what Jesus said about Himself in the four gospels. Jesus has identified Himself as the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Sent One, the source of Living Water, the Bread of Life, and the Light of the World just to list a few of His words about Himself. If you want to know who Jesus is, read the New Testament and pay careful attention to His words.

2) Jesus goes on in vs. 26, “I have much to say about you and much to judge…” Jesus is the authority about who we are…He is qualified to judge us. Jesus is the One we will face at the end of our lives. We should care more about what He says about us than what others say about us.

3) Jesus continues, “…he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.” Jesus is the Sent One…He hails from the Father, and He speaks what He has heard from the Father. He has been very redundant on this point thus far in John’s gospel.

John comments in vs. 27 that “they did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father.”
Church, let’s face it: it would have been difficult for us to accept that the carpenter from Nazareth was the Messiah of God. He didn’t ride in on a white horse. He didn’t come brandishing a sword. He spoke of God as His personal Father and claimed to “come from above.” Let’s give the Jews the benefit of the doubt here that it was probably hard to put all the clues together. However, Jesus will now speak to how we will finally come to truly know who He is. Look at vs. 28-29:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.

How do we come to know who Jesus is? How do we recognize Him as the Sent One, the Obedient Son, and the Savior of the world?

The cross. Why the cross? How is it that Jesus will be recognized as God’s Son, the Lamb of God, and the hope of the world when He is nailed to a Roman cross?

Perhaps it’s because the cross is counter-intuitive to the ways of this world.

In the world, those in power exalt themselves and oppress the powerless. The cross of Christ represents the Supreme Power of the universe laying down His power to save the oppressed.

In the world, greatness is equated with conquest; on the cross, greatness is equated with sacrifice.

In the world, people insist on their entitlement; on the cross, the only truly entitled One set His crown aside.

In the world, justice means revenge; on the cross, justice is accomplished by substitutionary atonement.

In the world, the victim of oppression curses the persecutors; on the cross the victim begged for the forgiveness of His persecutors.

In the world, self-preservation informs every decision; on the cross, the Jesus reckoned the salvation of the world to be worth the cost of His sinless life.

There is no greater contrast that sets apart Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God and the Savior of the world than that moment when He is lifted up on a cross. It is there that we see the unconditional love of the One who will not let us go. It is on the cross that we come to see the perfect obedience of God’s only Son, “obedient even unto death on a cross” as Paul writes in Philippians 2.

Place Jesus on the greatest throne in the largest kingdom…place Jesus in the Oval Office…place Jesus in front of a million-man army…place Jesus on Broadway, in Hollywood, or inside the NBA hall of fame…and we would never know Him as anything other than a man of this world.
But look upon the Lamb on that cross…the perfect, unblemished Lamb of God, crying out to His Father, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do…” and we know…don’t we? We know that man was not of this world. We know that man was from above. We know that man had a relationship with God that was intimate…that He was perfectly in sync with the Father. We know that man didn’t have to die…He chose to die in our sin so that “the world” might be forgiven and enjoy His status with the Father.

Look to the cross, and we know—He was telling the truth, He is the truth, He is the only truth.

We will die in our sins unless we believe in Jesus…look to the cross. The sin that is destroying our country and every country, our family and every family is spreading fast and it is terminal…look to the cross. The fractured relationships in our homes, in the workplace, in our city seem insurmountable…look to the cross. The deep roots of racial inequality and oppression continue to inform our systems and create an unjust disparity between the “haves” and the “have nots”…look to the cross. We are the world, and in this world we will face many hardships…but look to the cross--Jesus has overcome the world!

Look to the cross; see our Savior high and lifted up for you and me and this sin-sick world, and believe. Unless we believe in Him, we will die in our sins. Believe!

Let us pray.