Many years ago, I ran the Marine Corps Marathon. This was well before you had to qualify for the race, and my ultimate goal was simply to finish it. I trained for months: long-distance conditioning, a strict nutrition regimen—all to prepare for the grueling 26-mile journey.

The day of the race, adrenaline surges. Throngs of people stand cheering on the sidelines, volunteers man tables set up with water and snacks. When the gun went off, I burst across the starting line, exhilarated—feeling like I could run sheer across the country.

Somewhere around mile 11, though, the race course turns into a sort of dead zone: a lonely stretch with no spectators and fewer water stands. For roughly six miles, runners are left with just the sound of our heaving breath, and the voices of doubt in our heads.

In that dead zone, around Mile 15, I had my first thought of quitting. I rationalized: it wouldn't hurt to walk for just a bit. But deep down, I knew if I walked any of it—even 50 meters—I wouldn't make it to the finish line. I had to keep my momentum.

At some point, near Mile 18, I realized I was hungry. Not the small grumble you get when you're an hour past breakfast time. No, this was hunger the size of a gaping headwound. As I found myself scouting for a refreshment table, I would've sold my soul for half a banana.

But given my position in the rear of the pack, when I arrived at the next table, all the snacks were gone. My energy ebbing with each step, soon all I could think about was food.

Just as I was about to end it, to head to the sidelines to collapse, I crossed paths with a fellow runner I'd trained with on occasion. We stayed together for a while, commiserating over our pain and waning energy. And then, as if a lightbulb flickered, she suddenly remembered what she'd stashed in her shorts pocket that morning: a single piece of butterscotch candy. One piece. We looked at each other, my mouth began to water, but I shook my head—you have it, I said. It's yours.

In the next moment, she tore off the wrapper, bit it in half, and offered the other half to me. Now, I have always been, even pre-

COVID times, something of a germaphobe. But I hesitated not a nanosecond in taking that half piece of candy.

When the sugar hit my system, that little rush of sweetness, I never felt so alive. And between that candy and my friend's company, I made it through the dead zone and across the finish line—victorious.

Lent is a bit like a marathon. Over halfway through now, we may find ourselves wearying of the journey. Last month we may have been excited about our Lenten disciplines, only now to find ourselves, like the Israelites, grumbling with impatience in the wilderness. And particularly as we mark the one-year anniversary of the pandemic, we may be quite tired of tests of endurance.

In our weariness, today's Gospel brings us John 3:16, offering a sweet burst of energy—a beacon of hope: "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."

John 3:16 is the stuff of bumper stickers, banners and tattoos. When I googled most Bible popular verses, it appeared at the

top of almost every search result that came back—dozens of websites, all touting John 3:16 as their #1. Of the 31,102 verses in the Bible, some say if we lost all scripture except that one verse, we would still have enough to give us hope.

The challenge though is that we tend to treat John 3:16 as a trademark of sorts—an affirmation of our status as "saved." And the danger in focusing on this single verse, however hopeful its message, is that it oversimplifies Christianity and seems to divide people into categories of those who believe and those who don't. Having been in both camps, I can safely say the distinction is neither simple, nor the most salient point of this Gospel reading.

In trying to grasp what's going on in this passage, it's important to note that Jesus had just been speaking with Nicodemus, a respected Jewish community leader, and says to him, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." Nicodemus, a "teacher of Israel," does not understand. He hears the words Jesus speaks but cannot get past a surface-level, human understanding of what it means to be born; he cannot grasp what it takes to enter God's kingdom.

With all the contrasting images of bronze serpents being lifted up, darkness and light, salvation and condemnation, we may be as perplexed as Nicodemus, by this morning's readings.

The temptation is to latch on to the beautiful promise of John 3:16: For God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son. But, however glorious those words, the fact is, we cannot reduce our faith to a single verse. If we live by a bumper sticker slogan, we're missing a lot of the message.

Lent's focus on penitence calls us to peel off the bumper sticker and take a close look at what's beneath—the flaking paint, the rusting metal—all the ways we are prone to live in the darkness and succumb to the flesh.

Paul tells us we were dead through the trespasses and sins in which we once lived, and that God made us alive together with Christ—saved and raised up and seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." So, the question is, are we living as if we've been raised up with

Jesus in the heavenly places? Or are we living as if we're still in bondage to our sin?

The sin of this broken world can consume us; it can make us numb. Every day we see the grave injustices that people of color suffer, the plight of immigrants and refugees, the hatred and polarization within our nation, the xenophobia, the addictions ravaging our society.

And there is the kind of sin that may be closer to home but harder to pinpoint—those subtler sins, more difficult to discern: our relentless egos, our fixation on money and success, our complacency with the status quo, our inherent biases, our unchecked privilege. In our impatience, we can lose focus and turn away from God and toward the shiny objects the world dangles before us, while we stand on our laurels as believers in Christ, saved by grace.

But Paul urges us to remember we have been saved not by our own doing, but by *the gift* of God's grace. Christianity is not just believing a story from over 2,000 years ago—but allowing our lives to be transformed by the Jesus we meet in the Gospel of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Our response to this gift requires we continually hold up a mirror and acknowledge what we see. That, as an integral part of our faith life, we continually confess the ways we remain in bondage to the flesh: things done and left undone, how we have not loved God with our whole heart, how we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

For beyond John 3:16, the rest of the story is that we are free to live victoriously into the way of life God prepared for us. The grace of salvation doesn't mean we won't sin—but that we won't be in bondage to that sin. We are free to repent, to love and be loved by God. And when we shine the light of Christ's love to neighbors near and far, those we like and dislike, both friend and stranger, we do more to spread the Gospel than any bumper sticker or billboard ever can.

This is the gift that keeps on giving. We receive grace, we give grace, and through us, others find the grace that Jesus offers. As we live transformed by grace into our eternal life in Christ, we become the light in a world that desperately needs to see Christ in us. *We were created for this way of life.* Nothing else

will truly fulfill us, satisfy our hunger, or give us energy for the road ahead, but living into God's purpose for us.

The road to Jerusalem is long. We may find ourselves growing weary. As we continue on our Lenten journey and beyond, may we continue asking ourselves, am I living my best Christ-centered life? Or am I merely singing the praises of a bumper-sticker Gospel, while living as if I'm still enslaved by sin? In this test of endurance, will we get lost in the dead zone, or will we sprint victoriously across the finish line?

Amid the darkness of a broken world, our light is not at the end of a tunnel but rather in the here and now—the eternal light of Christ. Let us draw strength not from any single verse, but from the Gospel's overarching message of God's all-encompassing love. Let us live boldly into the purpose for which God created us—saved by grace, freed from the bondage of sin—so that, in thought, word and deed, the offerings and oblations of our lives shout out the Gospel's good news—*for God so loved the world.*