

John 3.14-21

4th Sunday in Lent

Ann J. Deibert
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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

Saved!

It is possible that John 3:16 is the most universally known verse in the bible. I've heard that in the south, there are signs along the roadside that simply say, "John 3:16." There's even one on I-65 just south of Seymour, Indiana, which isn't even in the south!

Many sports fans in this country know of the verse; maybe not the content but certainly the citation. I'm not a sports fan but I remember years ago seeing John 3:16 painted on a bed sheet, waving from the balcony of some game on television. What did it mean? Was it a reference to a great sports star and a memorable score? Was it a cheer stimulated at some critical point in the game? No! It was a bible verse: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life." That's the King James version of it. I know it by heart (just like a lot of you, I bet) even though I never had a King James Bible growing up and my church didn't use the King James. But there it is.

John 3:16 is embedded in today's gospel reading. John 3:14-21 is the second half of a larger story in John's gospel that begins with verse 1 of chapter 3. The story starts with a dialogue. Following the dialogue, Jesus gives a discourse which includes general theological themes arising from the dialogue. This is a pattern which the Fourth Evangelist will use several times in this gospel.

The dialogue that pairs with this morning's lectionary reading is between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus, you may remember, is a religious leader who comes to see Jesus at night. For John, this is a bit of a mixed message. To seek Jesus out is the first step of discipleship in this gospel. However, the seeking out is done at night and for this gospel writer, night is a symbol for "separation from the presence of God."¹

Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above—some translations say born again. The confusing thing for us English readers is that the Greek word means both things at the same time. Both translations are correct and must be held together: to be born from above and to be born again. Gail O'Day in her commentary on the gospel of John says "Jesus' words to Nicodemus...are unavoidably and intentionally ambiguous because of the inherent double meaning of *anothen*"²—the Greek word that means "again" and "from above."

Do you recall that this double meaning had Nicodemus quite confused? He wanted to know how a grown person could crawl back up into their mother's womb and be born again.

Jesus then uses another word with a dual meaning. This time it's the Greek word *pneuma* which means "wind" and "spirit" at the same time. The wind/spirit blows where it will. We know when it is present but we cannot control it or determine where it will go.

¹ Gail O'Day. "The Gospel of John," *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. IX, Nashville; Abingdon, 1995, p548.

² *Ibid.*, p549.

At this point in the conversation Nicodemus is more confused and Jesus chastises him for being a religious teacher but not understanding any of this.

And then Nicodemus disappears from the story and Jesus expounds on what has just taken place. Jesus draws on a story from the Hebrew scripture in the book titled “In the Wilderness” (the Bible as we know it calls the book “Numbers”). Moses and the Hebrew people are in the wilderness and poisonous serpents were biting and killing them. God told Moses to make an image of a serpent, elevate it on a pole and when someone was bitten, they would look at the serpent on the pole and they would live.

As I read from John 3 I’m going to interject some comments that I hope will help us understand this text. I’m reading the text this way today because we only hear the gospel of John a few times a year compared to Matthew, Mark and Luke which have a whole year in the lectionary dedicated to each one of them. John’s gospel is pretty different than the other three so I’ll point out particular Johannine characteristics along the way. You may want to open a bible to John, chapter 3 and follow along. (You can find it on page: 94 of the New Testament portion of the pew bible.) Verse 14 begins:

“...just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,”

A few words about “Son of Man” as the Fourth Evangelist uses it in contrast to how the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) use it. In the synoptics, “Son of Man” is a title associated with Jesus’ suffering and death, lowliness and future coming. [In John’s gospel] the Son of Man is the one who bridges the distance between heaven and earth.”³ The “Son of Man” goes between heaven and earth and connects the two.

In John’s gospel, Jesus doesn’t start on earth and then ascend to heaven. Jesus starts in heaven and descends to earth.

Think back to the very first chapter of John’s gospel—the passage that is read at Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day—we hear that Jesus is the Word of God, the light of the world, the Son of God (or as John 1.18 puts it: God the only Son). This is the One who has come from God to make God known to the world—to us.

“...just 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.”

A few words about eternal life. I imagine most of us think about eternal life as being something that happens to us if we go to heaven. It happens in the future. After we die. Eternal life is that time when we play harps and praise God and generally do whatever you do in heaven for a really, really, really long time. What this gospel means by eternal life is the change that happens because of faith in Jesus. “To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God.” It is life “lived in the unending presence of God.”⁴ That may be a future reality but for the writer of John’s gospel it’s also a present reality.

Now verse 16!

“For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the

³ *Ibid.*, p532.

⁴ *Ibid.*

only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

And here we remember Nicodemus coming to see Jesus at night and how John uses the contrasts of those who live in the light and those who live in darkness as the contrast between good and evil. But it’s easy in our society to let that metaphor of light and dark slide into becoming a racist idea that says those who are lighter—that is, with light skin—are good and those who are darker—that is, with dark skin—are bad. This was not the Fourth Evangelist’s issue but it becomes ours when we live in a time when the biblical material gets used for bad purposes.

So we might paraphrase verse 19 to say, “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved the shadows and to live undercover rather than live in the light because their deeds were evil.”

And continuing on with verses 20 and 21: “For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

It is easy to memorize John 3:16 and forget about what goes before or after it. It’s also easy to memorize John 3:16 and think all we have to do is believe that Jesus is the Son of God and we’ll go to heaven. And that’s not the whole picture either.

“Believing in Jesus” is not an intellectual endeavor or a cognitive agreement with a particular doctrinal statement. Even Nicodemus knew that Jesus had come from God but that didn’t seem to help him. The Greek root of the word we translate “to believe” is really “to give one’s heart to.” Marcus Borg in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* reminds us that believing in Jesus “means to give one’s heart, one’s self at its deepest level, to the post-Easter Jesus who is...the side of God turned toward us.”⁵

But before any of us believe or don’t believe, God is loving the world so much that God sends God the Son, the one who is close to the Holy Parent’s heart. And Jesus makes God known in ways the world has not known God before.

God loves the world so much that God provides a way for us to have eternal life—to live life in God’s unending presence—now—not just later. This is rather astounding because in John’s gospel, “the world” generally refers to the human beings who are at odds with God. The term “the world” is a negative term for this gospel. And still God gives Jesus to the world that we might be saved. That’s not “SAVED!” in the way of the fundamentalist preachers trying to get everyone signed up for heaven.

You know that bumper sticker that says, “Eternal life: Smoking or Non-Smoking?”?

That’s not really what being saved is all about. Being saved also means to be made whole, to be healed, to live in God’s unending presence. That’s what’s Jesus enables for us—that’s what being saved is all about.

And while “the world,” in John’s gospel, generally refers to people who prefer to live in the shadows and undercover—where the Light of the World has a harder time reaching—even so, God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world (although some might have advised God that this would be a better strategy). God sent Jesus into the world to save it—to make it whole—to heal it. And not just it—us.

⁵ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, San Francisco: Harper, 1994, p137.

“Yet the very presence of Jesus confronts the world with a decision, to believe or not to believe—to give our hearts—or not—and making that decision is [a] moment of judgment...The way a person acts in the presence of the light is [a] defining mark of a person’s identity.”⁶ We probably all know people whose lives have little to hide and we also know people who try to hide plenty. We know in ourselves what it is like to open ourselves to God’s light and what it is like to flee from that truth-revealing and all-loving presence.

But it is first and foremost God’s gracious love for us that seeks to save us, to make us whole, to heal us and set us free. And that gracious love of God invites us to a decision. Perhaps both a one-time decision and a decision that we choose again and again.

Erik Routley, the 20th century hymn writer, says it this way:

Great God, your love has called us here as we, by love, for love were made.

In Christ you call our name and then receive us as your own
not through some merit, right or claim, but by your gracious love alone.

You suffer and serve...and show how grandly love intends
to work till all creation sings.

Great God, in Christ you set us free, your life to live, your joy to share.

Give us your Spirit’s liberty to...offer all that faith can do while love is making all things new.⁷

⁶ O’Day, p554.

⁷ excerpts from Erik Routley, “Lord God, Your Love Has Called Us Here” [changing “Lord” to “Great”], *Rejoice in the Lord*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1985.