

IN THIS WAY, GOD LOVED THE KOSMOS...
2nd Sunday in Lent, Cycle A — March 5, 2023

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You might have looked at the cover of today's service bulletin, and thought to yourself, "Hmm... That looks kind of familiar, but, it also really looks different." ... Or maybe not. But it is a hint about what I want to discuss today.

Those of us who are old enough, ... and I suspect that is most of us here this morning, might remember that major televised sporting events in the 1980's often included something like the following, perhaps in the first row behind home plate at Yankee Stadium, or in the stands along the 50 yard line at Lambeau Field: A person, usually a young man, wearing a rainbow colored afro wig [and doesn't that description date me!] Holding up a sign that simply reads "John 3:16".

This one verse is, with the probable exception of the Lord's Prayer, the most often memorized line in the New Testament.

The translators and editors of the New Revised Standard Version, the translation of the Bible authorized in the Episcopal Church to be read during worship, did something very interesting with this verse. When you look at almost all the books of the Bible, including John's gospel, the text is broken into paragraphs. The small verse numbers make it hard to recognize, but the editors made this one sentence a separate paragraph, all by itself. This is unusual. It is also a recognition of the importance of these words:

(16) 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.

Simple. Straight forward. We would conclude that it is a clear statement of doctrine. But [and there is always a "but"] is that what happened in this gospel unit? Should this sentence properly stand alone, isolated from the context of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus? I think it is actually a problem, and here is why:

First, let me observe that we Christians tend to speak in a kind of shorthand that we assume all hearers "get." Well, actually, within Christianity there are institutional and doctrinal traditions that often use different vocabularies, and assume different meanings.

This text in particular has been reduced, in this shorthand, to a summary definition of what it means, from an evangelical perspective, to be saved. Our guy sitting behind home plate is acting out this understanding... "If one believes in their heart, and expresses with their lips that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior, they will be saved."

New Testament scholar Dr. Mark Davis refers to this reductionism as “the Billy Grahamization of John 3:16.” That is not a compliment from Davis. What he is saying, is that, this particular theological shorthand statement views salvation in a particular ... and exaggeratedly individualized way. It also implies that the human enterprise consists of being saved (“getting right with God”) , and “going to heaven when I die.”

There is a real tension between this hyper-individualized understanding of salvation, and a more corporate understanding. And this tension erupts from time to time. In August of 2009, then Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Shori opened General Convention with a speech, in which she made the statement, “The belief that any of us, *alone*, can *individually* be in right relationship with God is the great Western heresy.” Those who pay attention to Episcopal church stuff might remember the uproar. Conservative Episcopalians were in a state. Bishop Katherine was accused of “being untethered from Scripture.” All of this reflected the fact of tension between varying understandings of essential teachings.

How does the 3rd chapter of John inform our understanding of faith?

Let’s look at the entire story of Jesus and Nicodemus, and see how the famous verse 16 is integral to that whole.

Who was Nicodemus? John tells us that he was a pharisee and member of the leadership council of the Temple, the Sanhedrin. The story tells that Nicodemus came to Jesus during the night. The story doesn’t tell us why, but the traditional understanding is that Nicodemus was avoiding any effect to his reputation from being seen in public with Jesus.

Nicodemus appears three times in the Gospel; here in chapter 3, a couple of verses in chapter 7, where he reminds the Sanhedrin that one has the right to be heard before being judged. Finally, he appears after Jesus’ crucifixion, assisting Joseph of Arimathea to provide for Jesus’ burial. Nicodemus was not an enemy of Jesus, nor was he allied with the enemies of Jesus, but he is not exactly portrayed as a disciple.

Jesus and Nicodemus have a conversation. We are used to the translation we have heard most of our lives. Today, I want us to hear from two other translations, so that we can hear with fresher ears, and perhaps find insights we might otherwise miss: Mark Davis’ translation from his blog “Left Behind and Loving it”, and Robert Funk and Roy Hoover’s translation from their book, “The Five Gospels.”

Here is the outline of their encounter:

Nicodemus says “ to Jesus, we know you are from God and God is with you because of the Signs you are performing

Jesus replies, **“As God is my witness, I say to you, unless someone is born anew, that person cannot see the reign of God.”**

Here the gospel writer utilizes a literary device. The Greek word herein translated “anew” carries a second, parallel meaning, “from above.”

And this dual, or perhaps dueling meanings leads to the other familiar literary device in John’s Gospel: Nicodemus interprets Jesus literally, AND hears him to mean “born again”, but Jesus is speaking figuratively AND is really saying “born from above.” In confusion Nicodemus asks how such a thing as being born a second time is possible

Jesus clarifies: **“As God is my witness, I say to you, unless someone would be born out of water and spirit, he is not able to enter into the reign of God.”**

WHAT IS JESUS SAYING? In the synoptic gospels (M, M and L) there are lots of references to “the Kingdom of God”, or in Matthew’s Gospel, “The Kingdom of Heaven”, and here rendered in Mark Davis’ translation, “the Reign of God.” But that phrase only appears two times in John’s gospel, both in this dialogue. The phrase Jesus uses throughout the balance of John’s gospel, in Greek is *zoe aionias*, which is usually translated “Eternal Life.” Unfortunately, our Christian shorthand captures that meaning as “living in heaven, with no end, after we die here on earth.”

This shorthand understanding truncates the full meaning of Jesus words! The raw direct translation of the Greek “*zoe aionias*” is “life of the age [or eon], enduring”. Wow, what does *that* mean?

Let’s recognize this is a different, more nuanced idea than the typical shorthand meaning our brains gravitate toward when we hear “eternal life.:

Listen again to how Jesus starts his discussion with Nicodemus: **“As a God is my witness, I say to you, unless someone is born anew, that person cannot see the reign of God.”**

Jesus says clearly that something has to change in us for us to “see the reign of God.” We need a kind of “new birth” so we can see with eyes that are not limited to what is “flesh.” In short, we need to learn to see a new eon, a new era for humanity.

So what’s wrong with this era, this eon? You might remember that we heard the story of Adam and Eve, the serpent’s temptation. That story is really mystical, really hard to parse. But if we read further, to chapter 3 in Genesis, it becomes crystal clear. Adam and Eve’s sons, Cain and Able, both sacrifice to God, but Cain becomes jealous of the favor he perceives that God is giving his brother. What does he do? He murders his brother, and tries to hide his deed from God, and when God asks him where Abel is, he

replies with a question that has echoed down through the ages, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

The current age is THE AGE OF VIOLENCE. Paul lists the hallmarks of our time: Envy, avarice, deceit, drunkenness. The Ten Commandments are designed to provide a program for control for this proclivity humans have, Don’t take what isn’t yours, don’t testify falsely, don’t covet, don’t violate others’ relationships, and of course, don’t kill. But even our means of social control are infested with violence.

But this new era, this new way to be is not immediately visible. It is difficult to perceive. Because the Reign of God doesn’t magically erase the residue of the Age of Violence. We look around, and we see the tribalism, reflected in hyper-nationalism. We see the kind of dualistic thinking that divides the world into Us and Them, Friend or Enemy, Saved or Damned, privileged or unworthy of consideration.

Jesus himself is the preeminent victim of sanctioned violence, executed by empire on a cross. But what Jesus did, in his life, actions, teaching AND death, was to expose the current age for what it is, and to inaugurate a new age, a new way to be, visible to those who are “born in the Spirit,” and manifest and furthered by the believers’ efforts to live in this new way.

This is what Jesus meant by “zoe aionias”. Life of the new age; eternal life.

Listen to this key section of today’s reading as translated by Funk and Hoover

“In the wilderness, Moses elevated the snake; in the same way the Son of Adam is destined to be elevated, so everyone who believes in him will have *real life*. **[and now we come to that big verse!]** This is how God loved the cosmos; God gave up his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not be lost, but have real life. After all, God sent his son into the cosmos not to judge the cosmos but to rescue the cosmos through him.

What does it mean to be born anew; born from above, born in water and the Spirit? What does it mean to “see the reign of God”? What does it mean to not be lost but have REAL LIFE?

I said earlier that I have a problem with the typical way that John 3:16 is employed to define the Christian enterprise. This approach IS too individualistic, too much focused on “heaven after we die.” Jesus’ promise is that he came that we can live into a new age that is not characterized by violence, division, hatred and exploitation, but rather is reflected the beatitudes.

Jesus, in John’s recounting of his last supper, prayed over his disciples, saying “³And **this is eternal life**, that **they may know you**, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Jesus frames life in the coming age, “eternal life” as knowing and living in relationship with God. Jesus’ Father is our Father as well, and if he is God

and Father to the cosmos, to all that is, than we are, all of us, brothers and sisters. I believe that when we see this truth, we are beginning to see the Reign of God shining through the fog of the world as we know it.

May it be so! Amen.