

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
23rd January 2022

John 3:1-16

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt

God Consciousness

“**F**or God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, so that all who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” According to Martin Luther, the man credited with kicking off the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago, this verse is the gospel in a nutshell. I doubt it’s much of a stretch to call this the most popular verse in the entire Bible, with the 23rd Psalm perhaps coming in a distant second.

If you’ve been around here with me for more than a few Sundays, you have probably heard me mention

that there’s a problem with the way many of us, probably most church-goers, have been taught to read the Bible. Want to know what the Bible says about sex or money or a supra-lapsarianism interpretation of the Yahwist Fall narrative in Genesis 2 (and yes, that’s a real thing that absolutely no one should ever have interest in researching!)? All you need to do is turn to the handy index in your study Bible and find a list of verses that give you the answers to all of life’s questions.

It’s a way of treating the Bible not as a storybook, but as a reference manual. Like a

dictionary or a set of World Book encyclopedias (ask your parents if you don't know what those are.)

I think there are a few problems with reading the Bible that way. One is that there generally is not a consistent single viewpoint on any topic. Want to know what God thinks about sex? Well, there's a commandment not to commit adultery. You can find it shortly after the stories of Abraham having sex with one of his maidservants, Hagar, because his wife, Sarah wasn't getting pregnant like they hoped. Sandwiched in between those is the story of Jacob marrying two women and having children by both of them, along with two more of their servant women. King Solomon reportedly had 1000 wives and concubines and David had a special friendship with Jonathan and loved

him "better than the love of women." Paul told the Corinthian church folks to get married if they want, but it was better to just stay single like he was.

When we treat the Bible like an answer book, like a reference guide for all of life's questions, we miss out on perhaps the best part of the Bible...the reason that most of us would prefer to read a good novel rather than read a dictionary. The Bible is a collection of stories that, like a good novel, can invoke our imagination and draw us into a story in a way that doesn't just inform us, but transforms us.

I offer that little diversion because I think this passage in particular, and this final verse in particular, has been read as a nugget of information rather than a story of transformation. As information, it goes like this:

1. God loved the world.

2. God sent God's son to the world

3. God tells us to believe the right thing

4. God saves us from this terrible world and promises we get to heaven

Believe and escape. And if that is, as Martin Luther suggested, if that is the Bible in a nutshell, then that makes Christianity little more than an earth evacuation plan. We're stuck in this terrible, fallen, broken creation for now, but as long as you know and believe the right information, you can get out of this place and go to a better place for eternity.

I wonder if, this morning, we can take a step back from this verse and look at the larger story, the context, into which John writes these words. The story begins with Jesus being approached "under cover of night" by a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus may or may not

have been a real person. He isn't mentioned by any of the other gospel writers or anywhere else in the New Testament. But whether Nicodemus is a real person or a caricature, he represents something greater than just himself. He represents a spiritual blindness, a struggle to see and connect with the Divine, with God, even when God is right in front of us. So Nicodemus asks the kinds of questions that other readers of John's gospel might also have been asking about Jesus. He represents someone who is trying to find a deeper spirituality but is struggling to move beyond the religious structures of his experience.

So we know two things about Nicodemus. First, he comes to Jesus under cover of night. John's gospel opens with a description of Jesus as the light, coming to enlighten everyone. But Nicodemus

doesn't see that light. He's still in the dark and missing this divine light that is right in front of him.

We also know that he's a Pharisee. Jesus often butts heads with the Pharisees in the gospels, but not because they are bad or evil people. The Pharisees represent an approach to religion with which many of us may also identify. The Pharisees were scholars of religious law. They studied the Torah. They knew the religious laws in the same way that you hope the attorney you're paying to draft your will knows estate law.

As scholars of religious law, their approach to religion was both literal and rule-based. God says in Leviticus to prepare a sacrificial dove in this manner, and they were expected to make sure those rules were followed. That's the tradition out of which Nicodemus

comes, and it's the Priestly tradition. Using the Bible as a reference manual, as a rule book, that's perhaps our modern-day equivalent to what Nicodemus represents.

Jesus, on the other hand, seems to locate himself more within the Prophetic tradition. That tradition isn't something opposed to the Priestly tradition, but the emphasis is different. The emphasis is on the experiential more than the regulatory. Jesus, like the prophets before him, Jesus knows the rules and he values them. But he also wants to invite people to move beyond them to not just know something intellectually about God, but to experience God.

When Nicodemus comes to Jesus, he first addresses him as "rabbi," a position of great status in the Jewish world. He acknowledges that Jesus must somehow be

related to God, for only if God were working through him could he do the “signs” that he did. Now, so far in John, Jesus has only done one “sign”—taking the water in the vessels used for a purification ritual, a symbol of religious law, and turning it into the spirited wine of new life.

Nicodemus understands from this “sign” that Jesus is connected to God somehow, but he struggles to make sense of Jesus’ response. What does it mean to be “born from above?” And Nicodemus’ response shows so plainly that he is stuck in this one way of understanding, stuck in taking everything around him, even Jesus, literally.

Last summer, we did a series of sermons on some of the early stories in the Hebrew Bible and how to read them as parables. I think I started every one of those

sermons suggesting that I think they were meant to be read literarily, not literally. Nicodemus is stuck here in the literal.

“Born again?” he asks. “Am I supposed to return to my mother’s womb?”

It’s an absurd proposition written into the story to show us that Jesus is not speaking literally, and when we read Jesus’ words literally, as a rule book, we may well end up in the same place as Nicodemus—missing the point of what Jesus is saying. Standing in the darkness unable to see the light right before our eyes.

So Jesus is signaling to Nicodemus not to take his words literally, but he is telling Nicodemus something important here, I think. And if being “born again” isn’t a rulebook for getting into heaven, then what is it?

Think about what happens when you are born the

first time—you are alive and loose in the world. When you are first born, you change the world. Maybe in small ways at first, for the people closest to you. But the world changes because you're now in it. And those changes are not always easy...sometimes there are tears, sleepless nights, other times filled with joy and laughter. But the world is a different place when you are born.

Then, as Nicodemus struggles to understand this “birth” into a new consciousness, a new experience, Jesus leads, finally, into the famous verse of John 3:16, a verse about love. Somehow, love is tied to this rebirth, this new experience of life.

I wonder if we can see the difference. The difference between John 3:16 being a creed to believe in and it being an invitation to experience God by joining Jesus in

the act of loving the world, this world. Not escaping from it to get into heaven. But loving this world by choosing to live more fully in it.

As our Call to Worship this morning reminds us, “If God is the source of life, let us worship God by living. If God is the source of Love, let us worship God by loving. If God is the ground of being, let us worship God by being fully alive, by having the courage to be more fully human; the embodiment of the Divine.”

Amen.



