

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but they shall have eternal life.*

Such a beautiful verse, John 3:16. It is known to sum up the gospel. It has been said that if you removed everything in the Bible from the first word of Genesis to the last word of Revelation and kept only John 3:16, there would still be enough gospel left in that one verse to save the whole world. John 3:16 summarizes the love, faith, and hope that comprise Christianity. God loves, we respond in faith and trust, and the result is a quality of life that is filled with hope. The verse itself, as it stands, is sumptuous. Even the verses just before it, read today as part of the lectionary text, are awe-inspiring: Just as Moses held up the serpent for those suffering in the wilderness to look on it and be healed, so in the same way, the Son of Man will be raised up, and all who see and believe will be made whole.

The passage continues and we hear that God sent his one and only Son Jesus not to condemn or judge the world but to save the world! We might think that God wants to blame or criticize us, but this verse tells us that's not the case. We're told that those who believe in him are not condemned, and that is good news. But for those that do not believe... ah, there's the catch – *whoever does not believe*... I recall a rather uncomfortable moment from my childhood, I must have been six years old, and a relative across the country whom I was visiting was not-very-gently brushing my knotted hair, and saying sternly, "You do believe in Jesus Christ, don't you? Because you know, if you don't, you're going to hell!" as the sharp bristles repeatedly scraped the tops of my little ears. The whole experience was rather frightening. I went to church, I prayed at meals and at nighttime... was there something more I was supposed to be doing? "Yes, yes, I believe," I said. But what I've learned as I've grown in my faith over the years is that believing in Jesus is not an intellectual act – it's not about the mind and what we think, it's about the heart, it's about the relationship, it's about humility. John uses the Greek verb *pisteuo*, translated as "believe" that derives from the noun *pistis* meaning "faith;" therefore "those who *believe*" carries with it the notion of having faith or trust. Simply having belief in something can be a result of logical or rational thought; having faith in, or placing one's trust in something is a result of an experience, likely a transformative one. The verse that speaks of those who do not believe having already been condemned is not that God punishes them, but that because they do not have faith in something powerful enough to bring them through any circumstance – when the diagnosis, or the pink-slip, or the dreaded phone-call comes -- they are without hope, and thus living in fear, despair, and misery. Perhaps the more important and appropriate question to ask in regards to this passage, is not "Do we believe in Jesus," as much as it is "Can we believe in a God who wants to save us?"

Theologian Richard Niebuhr says there is no such thing as atheism because everyone must have devotion to some object; everyone must have something they worship, that secures the meaning of one's existence. He calls this the center of

value. It is common for people to have more than one center of value, or to rip through various ones in search for meaning. In a story by Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, which is said to be an autobiography of Tolstoy's life, the main character does just this. Ivan first finds meaning in his career as a lawyer, he finds meaning in the power, but this value eventually wears off, and his center of value becomes his marriage. This, too, soon loses its luster and his children become his center of value. This doesn't sustain him either, and money becomes what he worships. If only he made this certain figure, all would be well. He is given the promotion he strives for, earns the income he had held up as most desirable, and still, it doesn't satisfy. He embarks on a remodel, and this holds him for a good long while, as he envisions this to be the fix that will give him ultimate meaning. We see in the story that as he becomes more and more disillusioned, he falls deeper into irritation and despair. It is only as he is dying, that he surrenders to the illusive force he has been resisting all his life, and Tolstoy tells us that Ivan falls through darkness into light. He finally encounters fully the one thing that can truly give his life meaning, and it is nothing he could attain by his own efforts. He is no longer terrified of death, because he sees that in death there is light, which he experiences as freedom, illumination and transcendence. His worry, hatred, fears and anxieties are lifted in the moment he surrenders to the light. His family, gathered round, witnesses a peace come upon him that they had never seen. Can we believe in a God who wants to save us?

The lectionary gospel passage read today is written in the context of Jesus speaking with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a teacher of Jewish law, who comes to see Jesus at night. Now, it could be that Nicodemus comes at night to avoid the crowds swarming around Jesus by day – Nicodemus wants some true 1:1; however, it is just as likely and implied that Nicodemus comes to avoid recognition by his associates that he was having the meeting. He was sneaking around. People who followed Jesus were being cast out of the synagogue, so we can presume that the Pharisees would not have condoned a meeting between the two. He wanted his curiosity kept under cover. This upstanding man of the community comes in secret, in the darkness. This is then in stark contrast to the woman at the well whom Jesus meets just after this passage, a woman of extremely low social-stature who is met by Jesus right out in the open, her deeds and truth being clearly seen. So we have the respected man tiptoeing around in the dark, and the contaminated woman, professing faith in broad daylight. And in the middle of these stories, a passage about darkness and light, the passage read today.

John tells us we love the darkness because we don't want our evil deeds exposed. In what ways do we operate in darkness? There's a story in the local news, about the husband of the superintendent of one of the school districts, who under a fictitious name, made disparaging remarks online about a parent in the district who was opposing a new learning regimen being promoted by the superintendent. We could say, by using a fictitious name and offering to pay the victim off, this man was operating in darkness. He didn't initially want his real name attached to the statements he was making online, and it caught up to him. I think this is what the gospel writer of John means when he says we love the darkness. And how this

relates to believing in Jesus is that, presumably, if we believe in Jesus, if we put our faith and trust in Jesus, we will not have reason to hide. If we understand that God loves us, and we respond in faith, it is likely that our actions will be those of integrity and which are pleasing to God. Sure, we will be tempted to do otherwise, daily, even hourly, and yet if we have God as our center of value, we will be drawn to the light, and perhaps think twice before making a choice where we must operate in darkness. The man accused of cyber-bullying eventually gave himself up, like the woman at the well who admitted her true colors in broad daylight. In my language, this is God breaking through, and I am confident that with God involved, all will eventually turn out ok. It is through our weakness that God's strength may be glorified. Can we believe in a God who wants to save us?

There was a time in my life when I was pursuing being the lead singer in a band. Rehearsals for this band were at 10pm in San Francisco. My kids were in bed, all was quiet, and I quickly grabbed my guitar and made a b-line to the door with a brief "See ya later," to my husband, who stopped me and said, "Let me get this straight. You're going out at ten o'clock at night, to go play music with 4 guys, dressed like that, and I'm supposed to be okay with this?" It was not long after that I began playing and singing for the church. Darkness to light. My deeds were exposed and I was called to a place of light where I didn't have to hide and sneak and pretend. And I'll tell you, I love living in the light. I'd much rather follow Jesus than those erstwhile band-mates in the Mission. Nothing against the Mission. Nothing against the band-mates. It was just an unhealthy combination at the time. It wasn't the plan that God had for me, and I'm grateful that I chose the light. The path wasn't looking good, and God steered me back on course. I gave up the band and was given the more stable and wholesome job at the church. Can we believe in a God who wants to save us?

Some transitions from darkness to light are not as easy or clear-cut as this one was, as in the case of the addict. It doesn't necessarily matter the object of the addiction – it could be drugs or alcohol, or food, or money or work or power, as in the case of Ivan Ilyich. The point is that the addict places the object of obsession in front of anything else, and the addict is willing to protect that object at any cost, including being willing to lie, cheat, or steal from innocent people, even loved ones. One addict says, "Drugs became more important to me than the people in the bars. I didn't care who I was hurting. The root of my trouble is selfishness and self-centeredness. I knew right from wrong, but I didn't do what was right. I felt the tap on my shoulder but I ignored it and didn't pay attention. I found myself on the steps of the crack house smoking meth, thinking my life was great. My mom was dying of cancer. I wasn't there for her. She had been there for me my whole life." As he shared this, he was crying, Living in darkness is a spiral. Unhealthy choices are made, with consequences that produce guilt and shame, and then more unhealthy choices are made to cover up. It's a life of hiding. The cop walks by, the heart rate goes up. Do they know? Do they know what I've done? In his darkest moment, he saw the light. He looked in the mirror and he no longer liked what he saw – the gig was up and the denial was broken, and he surrendered to the love of God. God

finally got through, and he knew God was his only option left. It was God or death. This man is now a year clean and sober, and he says his worst days sober are far better than his best days using drugs and alcohol. He has a job, a car, he's responsible and reliable, and he truly cares about other people. He is now living a life of integrity. This is the eternal life that is promised in John 3:16. Can we believe in a God who wants to save us?

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believeth in him will not perish, but shall have eternal life. They will not have a destructive end, but will have *zoen aionios*, eternal life. Eternal life.

We are promised in this passage that if we believe, we will have eternal life. It sounds like something out there, something in the future that lasts forever, like maybe heaven. But the meaning of *zoen aionios* is not about quantity but quality. When we have eternal life, we are living in communion with God, and it happens now, not just in the future. It is a continuum, what was, is and will always be, and John is saying that when we look to Jesus, we have this. That is to say, when we believe in Jesus Christ, we are saying yes to living in God's light today. We are saying that we put our trust in God. Eternal life is knowing God and Christ in this life in intimate communion, and condemnation is the absence of such knowledge and communion. Eternal life is not about quantity but quality of life. It is about living in the light instead of darkness.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so, Jesus says, the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. This is a quality of life that rids us from the lingering wounds of the snakebites, a quality of life where trust in God overrides any battle or struggle, this is a quality of life that upholds a faith that tells us no matter the circumstances, we will eventually be healed. To believe in Jesus is to receive the gift of faith that God can save us. It is, in a word, to have hope. Jesus says, "Your faith has healed you" and it is this hope in believing. He healed people then and he heals people now. I know this from personal experience and from others, that it happens time and time again. Believing in Jesus turns us around, turns us from darkness into light. Putting our faith in Jesus is saying, "I can't do this by myself and need help." It's passing on our burdens to the one who knows and understands. Jesus never lost his trust in God and God's ability to save him, and that is the definitive hope. He knew God was going to work through his weakness and that his suffering was not in vain. And by looking at Jesus, we know ours is not either. We are hard pressed, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but shall have eternal life. Can we believe in a God who wants to save us?