

The Cross and the Cosmos

Numbers 21: 4-9 & John 3: 14-21

Fourth Sunday in Lent/ 26th March 2006

John 3:16 – so well-known, one of the most quoted verses of the Bible. It's proudly displayed on makeshift banners at football games so it can be broadcast to millions watching at home, touted on all kinds of Christian kitsch – book marks, pens, night lights, bumper stickers, and license tag plates. Do a Google search some time and just see what comes up. One link took me to an animated rendering of Jesus walking with the cross up to Calvary. The reformer, Martin Luther (1483-1546), said this verse was the “gospel in miniature.” Many would agree with him. “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.”

It does seem to say it all. A literal Greek reading would put it this way: “For in this way God so loved the world: that he gave the unique son, so that all the ones trusting in him would not perish, but have eternal life.” The verse clearly states the objective of God – love for the world. How? By sending the only-begotten Son. The sending of the Son thus gives something new which, when believed and trusted, springs forth in eternal life – or we could say, life touched by eternity here and now. What's implied in the latter half of the verse is that if you don't believe, then you don't get eternal life, you perish, you're condemned. You can see why this verse is so often used as an evangelism tool – if you believe in Jesus, you'll be saved; if you don't, well God help you. So much for God loving the world. Indeed, it sounds as if God's love is reaching out for only some in the world, for those who believe and trust in Jesus. Everyone else is on their own. Does God really only love those who trust and believe in Jesus? That's a tough question.

We have to be wary when anyone takes a verse of the Bible out of context and then builds a whole theology or belief system around it – which is often the case with John 3:16. Sure, this verse does a pretty good job summarizing the Christian life, but it doesn't say it all. Actually, this text has to be seen in context, in what comes before and after it, in order for it to really speak the gospel. So, if I may be so bold and with all due respect, I would like disagree with Dr. Luther. John 3:16 is not the “gospel in miniature” because it's *not evangelical enough*; it doesn't embrace the wide embrace of God's love. Why do I say this? Because we have to keep reading to verse 17. I think these verses should be read together, “For God so love the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.

For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Now here comes the really cool part. There's more going on here than the evangelical call to individuals to simply trust that Jesus is the Son of God and then you'll go to heaven. Although, far too many assumed that's the gist of the gospel and the Christian life – belief alone. This verse is doing more than simply inviting people to take responsibility for eternal salvation by believing God sent Jesus. Such a reading would mean one's eternal salvation was somehow contingent upon our ability to *choose* – and choose wisely. Some of us have difficulty choosing what to wear in the morning (!) or which brand of pasta to buy at the Giant (!); then we have to worry about choosing, believing certain things about Jesus? Is this good news?

First and foremost, these verses are making claims for what God has done, what God has already done through sending Jesus Christ. The world has *already* changed because of Jesus, we are called to accept it. *But whether we accept it or not does nothing to change the fact that God so loved the world.*

And it's the world –in the Greek, *cosmos* – that God loves. Now we tend to hear this reference to 'world' as creation, or maybe a collective rendering of humanity. God so love a world full of human beings that the Son was sent to redeem. But verse 16 doesn't say that and neither does verse 17 – that's why they need to be help together. The sending of the Son was so that the world might be redeemed – the world includes individuals, but not individuals apart from the world. And what does John mean by "world"? This is the cool part because it opens up the meaning of the text. It doesn't mean the creation, or this blue marble spinning in space. The *cosmos* has negative connotations in John's gospel (and elsewhere in the New Testament). The *cosmos* has a specific meaning. It means that force in the universe that is against God. The *cosmos* is everything in the universe that is at odds with God's intent for the created order. It is the comic forces, the systems of destruction and violence that tear creation apart and human beings as its creatures. The *cosmos* is everything in the universe that is against justice and wholeness. It is everything in the universe that is against love and mercy and forgiveness. The *cosmos* is everything in the universe that seeks to destroy and tear down, whereas God is the one who creates and builds up. The *cosmos* takes away life, whereas God is the God of life, who brings life out of barren places and surprises death with resurrection. The *cosmos* is everything in the universe that is sucking the life out of us. Yet – *and here is the grace!* – this is what God chooses to redeem. In this light, these two verses take on a radical new meaning.

“For God so loved the *cosmos*, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the *cosmos*, to condemn the *cosmos*, but in order that the *cosmos* might be saved through him.” It’s the *cosmos* that is to be redeemed and not destroyed. Because God is determined to love even that which is against God – the *cosmos* – the Son will be sent, not to judge and condemn and do away with, but in order that God can redeem that which is against God so that nothing will be able to stand in the way of God’s promise for the creation and God’s people. We see this same objective in other portions of scripture. In II Corinthians 5: 19, we find “in Christ God was reconciling the world (*cosmos*) to himself.” Or in Revelation 11: 15, which we usually associate with Handel’s (1685-1759) “Hallelujah” Chorus, we find the seventh angel blowing his trumpet and loud voices in heaven declare, “The kingdom of the world (*cosmos*) has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ. And he shall reign forever.” God wants to save, to redeem even that which is against God, because what is against God is ultimately against God’s people.

Now, “redeem” refers to buying the freedom of a slave. Apart from the power of Christ, we are enslaved to the *cosmos*, victims of it, ensnared in it. But we don’t see it because we are in over our heads in *cosmos*, it is both “out there” and “in here,” within our hearts and the depths of the unconscious, we cannot see its destructive effect over our lives on our own, we can’t see how it is slowly killing us, we can’t see how we often see live our lives actually at odds with God’s intent for us. We can’t see the problem, because we’re part of the problem and can’t see how it’s taking us far away from the life God wants us to have. That’s where the judgment comes in. It’s common to read this text this way: if I don’t believe, I will be judged at my death. But if we keep reading, the text doesn’t say that. This is the judgment, “that the light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.” It’s clearer in the Greek, “believers in Christ are not going to be judged, whereas unbelievers are judged already, due to their unbelief.”¹ The judgment is *now*, it is the price one pays for living in the dark, enslaved to the *cosmos*, a life that will not acknowledge just how much within us and in our society is against God.

What then is this belief that releases us from judgment? The answer is in verse 15. In John’s gospel seeing is believing, it requires our eyes, it requires that we look and live. "And 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." Jesus is pulling from the scene in Numbers. The Israelites are complaining bitterly against God, preferring

¹ Cullen I. K. Story, *The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose, Pattern, and Power*. Foreword by James E. Loder (Shippensburg, PA: Ragged Edge Press, 1997), 77.

the slavery of Egypt to the purging required in the wilderness. Yahweh sends poisonous snakes, biting many and causing others to die. Aware of their sin before God they go to Moses asking him to go to God. Here was Yahweh's response: they are to make a bronze depiction of the poisonous snake, set it on a pole, lifting it above the people, so that everyone who was bitten by the snake could look upon the bronze serpent and live.

The poisonous snakes represent the people's alienation from God, an alienation that led to moments of extreme pain and even death. It was only when the sin was put "out there" on the serpent, that they could see what was going on within them that the healing came. The healing comes through the acknowledgment of the sin, and the cause of the sin. If they were willing to look at the serpent - to see, to confess their sin - they would live. So that by looking at the source of one's pain, objectively, symbolically expressed before you, allows you to see your pain and your alienation from God, which is the first step to redemption

Christ's death upon the cross becomes like a mirror held up before our eyes in which we are invited to see ourselves - we are invited to see our sin which we can't see on our own.² When we look at him, lifted up on a cross, we are really seeing our pain and our torment. We are acknowledging our brokenness. *We are confessing our complicity with the cosmos dead set against God.* When we look at him, we see the suffering of our lives. Lifted high upon the cross, it's as if Jesus says, "Look at me and see what you're doing to yourselves. Look at me and see what you're doing to yourselves, destroying your humanity. But I will die for you in order to show you how you're killing yourselves."

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) said it best, "Our only health is the disease . . . and that to be restored, our sickness must grow worse."³ In order for sin to be eradicated, the *cosmos* must be exposed and seen for what it is. That's when the healing can start, the transformation, the redemption. When we're honest about whom we are, of the good and evil that dwells in the human heart, instead of denying it, pretending we're fine, but everyone else is messed up, that's when the healing starts.⁴

² I am indebted to James E. Loder (1931-2001) for this interpretation of the Numbers passage, its relationship to John 3, and his insight into the meaning of the cross.

³ T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," *Four Quartets, The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. 127.

⁴ Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: "The life of God cannot be destroyed and, however often we 'murder' Christ's Spirit within us, he always returns promising us new life and somehow mysteriously as we wrestle with God, discovering in the process the truth of who we are, both good and

This might all sound depressing, but it's not. *It's only when we are honest with ourselves that God can begin to do something with us.* That's when, as Jesus said to Nicodemus earlier in this chapter that one can be "born again" or "born from above," meaning born from God.

It's the *cosmos* within us and out there that God seeks to redeem. Every week this Celtic cross of St. John stares at us in worship, making this point. The circle at the center of the Celtic cross represents the world. The cross is then placed over the circle; the cross is placed over the world signifying its redemption. The cross and the *cosmos* – not to condemn it, but to redeem it, to save it.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

Catonsville Presbyterian Church

Catonsville, Maryland