

Sermon: If Ever the World Needed Saving
Text: John 3:1-17
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Context: WWPC
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“For God so loved the world . . .”

John 3:16a

I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how large a role this one passage has played in the history of Christianity, and not just in the history of Christianity, but the history of the world.

This famous night-time conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, one of the prominent religious leaders of his day -- this contains what is almost certainly the most famous passage in all of scripture: “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.”

Ordinarily one world-famous verse in any given passage is a gracious plenty -- enough for scholars and preachers and Christian disciples and adherents to chew on and ponder and debate for years at a stretch.

But it so happens that this passage also contains what may be the second most famous verse in the Bible: *You must be born again.*

In the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is the translation I prefer, that phrase, as I’m sure you noticed, is rendered *you must be born from above.*

I have heard people complain about this difference. Skeptics say that changing the wording of this key verse in this way is just a means for liberal-minded Bible scholars to water-down the plain teaching of Jesus, that you must -- emphasis on *must* -- be born again, whatever that might mean.

But it turns out that choosing to translate the passage this way, not that way -- born from above, rather than born again -- is not an unwarranted decision driven by a secret liberal agenda.

And it's certainly not intended to water this passage down, or to make it more palatable to those of us who have grown suspicious of that phrase, and that idea, of being born again.

This ambiguity, this twin meaning, is built into the passage itself. And more specifically into the Greek word *anōthen*.

Think of it like the English word, "present." It can mean, *I am here, as in, I am present*. Or it can mean, *I give this to you, as in, I present this to you*.

So it is with *anōthen*. It can mean "again", as in, *the rain is falling anōthen, again*. But it can also mean -- and this is actually the more common use in Greek -- "from above", as in *the rain is falling anōthen, from above*.

I suspect there will always be a fairly vigorous debate around the question of which of these two different meanings Jesus intended here.

But I think there may be a rather simple way to end this debate, and to answer this question: Did Jesus mean that you must be born again, or that you must be born from above?

Yes. Yes, he did.

If life has whacked you over the head so hard that you are spiritually or emotionally concussed, and that blow has left you walking half-dead through life, then, yes, you must be born again.

You must be brought back to life so that you can experience the wonder of love and the beauty of sunsets over the mountains.

Or if you're mired in the things of this world, say, you are stuck in the muck of consumer impulses you can't control, or you're prone to acting on corrupt intentions toward your customers or your constituents, then, yes, you must be born from above.

You must trade out those base, even profane impulses and replace them with higher values, values from above: honesty, integrity, compassion, generosity.

This approach to resolving the ambiguity of this phrase may or may not settle this long-standing debate, or resolve the argument about exactly what Jesus meant here.

What you can't argue about is that this passage from John 3 has literally changed the world. Where the debate immediately begins again, though, is whether this has always been for the good.

Yes, generations of missionaries and Christian educators went out to spread this great good news that God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. And because of that generous, sacrificial gift, you can be born again!

That is indeed good news. But over time this wonderfully loving and inclusive news came to have a less wonderful, decidedly more exclusionary aspect.

You're either born again or you're dead on arrival. You either believe in Jesus not only as the savior of the world, but as your personal savior or you will perish.

But you won't just perish. You will spend eternity imitating that famous burning bush in Exodus--the one that was on fire but was not consumed. And that will be even less fun than it sounds and at that point heaven itself will no longer be able to help you.

Mercifully, I believe there is a better way to think about and understand what's going on in this famous conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

I believe there is an immediate corrective to this exclusionary thinking: and it's built right into the passage itself. In fact, it comes in the very next verse after John 3:16.

John 3:17: God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

If the book of John ended there, you could, once again, spend hours and hours pondering and debating what that means with your friends in the adult Sunday school class at church.

But you don't have to do that because the Gospel of John doesn't end there. Jesus himself -- God's own Incarnate emissary to the world -- Jesus himself answers that question.

He shows us exactly what it means that God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Because, as Karoline Lewis, Associate Professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary has pointed out, this promise in John is not an abstract, theological concept. Yes, it's given for the world, but in practice the promise is concrete and it's specific (workingpreacher.com March 5, 2017).

All you have to do is read the rest of the book and you'll see that this is so.

Jesus loves a Samaritan woman and saves her from the humiliation of living in a foreign land, among people who hold her in contempt.

Jesus loves a man paralyzed his entire life, he heals him and saves him from the degradation of having to beg for enough coins in a given day to buy a loaf of bread.

Jesus loves a man blind from birth, he heals him and saves him from a sightless life, from the deprivation of never seeing his mother's face or the beauty of a mountain sunset.

Jesus loves Simon the leper, and saves him from living with the stigma of being unclean and untouchable.

Jesus loves Lazarus, a man dead in the tomb for four days, and saves him from death itself.

There are still more examples in this story of what this saving love looks like. But the point is that in the full arc of John's gospel, the Incarnate Christ shows us again and again exactly what it mean for God to so love the world, and what it looks like in very specific terms for that world to be saved through him.

Because of course it's love that's going to save it. How else is the world going to be saved?

Corporations are certainly not going to save the world from poverty and hunger.

The military is not going to save the world from terrorism.

The government is not going to save people living right here in this valley from unemployment and opioid addiction.

That's a hard truth to hear because if ever there was a time when the world needed to be saved, it's now, when it feels like there is so much that is broken and in need of saving --- our institutions, relationships between whole classes of Americans, (blacks and whites, rich and poor), public policy around just about everything that most of us in this room care about, from immigrants to the environment.

But if that's the hard news, here's the good news: As the Body of Christ, that is, as God's own incarnate emissary to the world, saving the world is now our job.

I realize this may not actually sound like good news. Saving the world sounds like waaaay too much work. A task that's doomed to fail if it's left to us. Sounds like something much more suited, and better left to, a Messiah.

But remember, this promise that the world can be saved is concrete and specific.

We save the world the same way Jesus did. By loving the same kind of people he did, vulnerable people, people on the margins. And by loving them the same way he did.

If in traveling down your life's road, you cross paths with a person on the margins, then do what Jesus did. Let them know that you love them and that God loves them.

Let them know they are welcome here, and that they are not forgotten.

You remember that Sally recently lit a candle for her friend José--a friend she'd known for many years who had just been detained as part of the new wave of deportation raids sweeping the country.

She shared with me just last night that she and Toby visited him at the facility in Georgia where he was being held--as it turns out, just before he was shipped off to an even harsher holding facility in NM, whence the authorities are planning to ship him back to Mexico--despite having lived her for 17 years.

That visit touched him. It mattered to José. It let him know that people here in WNC will remember him, and that people in this church will pray for him and advocate for him.

We have two African American crew members right now--Sydney and Justice. In separate conversations, I told both of them recently that their lives matter to me. And I told them their lives matter to everyone who worships in this space on Sunday morning.

I realize that may seem like a goofy thing to have said, but you know what? Their eyes lit up like stars. It clearly meant a lot to them to know that even if America's streets can be dangerous for young people who look like them, there are places near at hand where they are loved and safe and welcome.

We can do this work, friends. And, now, it won't save the world, ultimately. Loving one person at a time will not end all wars and it won't usher in the Kingdom of God from sea to shining sea.

Work that might have an effect like that, on a global scale is may or may not better left to a Messiah.

But what we know for certain is that this approach -- loving one person at a time, and then another one, and then another one, and then another one -- this approach worked for Jesus.

And if it's good enough for him, I reckon it's good enough for us.