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God Loved the World

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While we may be in Year A of our Lectionary where our gospel lessons primarily come from the gospel of Matthew, Lent is the liturgical season when we get a little taste of the gospel according to John

And, John is a very different gospel from Matthew and the other synoptic gospels

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the “synoptic” gospels because, as the title suggests, they kind of “see from the same eye” the story of Jesus: “syn-optic”

These three gospels share 75% of the content of Mark’s gospel – thought to be the earliest of those three – That’s a lot to hold in common

John is the outlier, John comes at the stories of Jesus from a different perspective and has about 90% different content...that’s a very different perspective

This is why we have three years to our lectionary cycle, but why John only makes special appearances

Today is one of those special appearances and it’s a very well-known story of Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus, the Pharisee, at night

You can hear John’s literary imagery and rhetoric in the text: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

John’s text is full of metaphor and symbolism like this which makes his gospel stick out compared to the others

Professor Ronald Allen points out another difference between John and our regular Year A gospel writer Matthew: “Matthew subscribes to apocalyptic Judaism,” a belief that God is coming into the world to intervene and put an end to the world as we know it, [whereas] “John leans towards a fusion of Judaism with themes from Greek philosophy influenced by Platonism.”¹

I know this sounds a little nerdy, but I think it’s fascinating and illuminating!

“From this perspective,” Dr. Allen tells us, “John sees the world as a two-story universe.

“The ‘world’ is the lower story, a sphere of hate, darkness, falsehood, slavery, and scarcity. The ‘world’ for John is thus not just the creation, teeming with humankind, animals and other *natura* but is a sphere of existence that lives in pain with only partial knowledge of God. Inhabitants of the world die.

“The upper story is heaven, centered around God. It is a sphere of life, light, truth, freedom and abundance. God reveals the possibility of heaven through Jesus. Eternal life is an essential quality of heaven.”

You can hear John’s perspective come through Jesus’ dialog: “Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus says, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

To Nicodemus this doesn’t make much sense, but when you understand that John had a vision of the world and of heaven in which there was a ginormous gap between the two you can start to see how Jesus is trying to bridge that gap

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-31-17-11>

Very truly, I tell you, to understand me which is what you have come seeking, Nicodemus, is to try to see that I embody the heavenly reality of life, truth, freedom, and abundance here in the world.

You of the world, you of hate, darkness, falsehood, slavery and scarcity cannot understand me unless you see that I embody heaven on earth

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Our understanding of the world and the heavens has changed quite a bit in 2,000 years

No longer do we understand the earth and heaven, or what we now call the atmosphere and space, to be separated the way Plato and John understood them

But, if I'm honest with myself, I often still function with a similar dichotomy in my thinking of the world and God's Kingdom

I experience a depth of life, truth, freedom, and abundance when I encounter my faith and feel the grace of God in God's community, through God's word, and in God's sacraments

And, I feel a disorientation at the hate, darkness, falsehood, slavery, and scarcity that is still so present in our world

I read the headlines this weekend and I felt that chasm grow – my response to what's happening in the world is often to push it away and shove it into the category in my head of “the broken world” so that I can somehow manage my day

I want nothing to do with these headlines, with these truths, and there's a part of me that hopes that by mentally pushing them away the distance will be real

No, we don't see the world separated from the heavens the way John and Plato understood them to be, but there is still a ginormous gap between the world as we see it and know it and God's kingdom of grace and love and mercy

Nicodemus, coming to Jesus at night – symbolizing either fear of exposure or possibly the idea that Nicodemus was still “in the dark” as to understanding who Jesus was – is not much different from the energy you and I bring to a church service on Sunday morning, to Bible Study on Wednesday, or a faithful conversation with another fellow Christian when you ponder “how do we get through these days? Who is Jesus to us now?”

How do we navigate this gap?

Can we stick out our arms and push ourselves away from the world and just dwell in God's kingdom?

Can we just say no to that, and yes to this – I'm not of that, I want to be here

I think I could make a theological argument for that

But, Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus challenges us beyond our comfort zones

Dr. Allen points out that “John 3:16-17,” probably one of the most familiar texts in scripture for how often it has been quoted, “offers a powerful theological rationale for why God sent Jesus into the world. God loves the world. Given [John's] world view, this perspective is stunning. The attitudes and behaviors of the world are inimical to God. According to everyday logic, God should be angry with the world and punish it. Yet, God loves the world.”

God loves the world

God should be angry with the world and punish it, but God LOVES the world

God sees the brokenness of the world and doesn't run from it but rather runs towards it

God knows how messed up things are and rather than punish the world with God's absence, God seeks to heal the world with Jesus' intentional presence

God so loves the world, God enters it – God bridges the gap not with a lifeline out of here, but rather Jesus darns the gap and weaves us all back together

This sounds great, doesn't it, but the implications of this truth are stark

God loves the broken world and intentionally enters it – I struggle with the broken world and want to separate myself from the broken parts

I want to distance myself so badly from what is happening – I want to say “I am not of that, I am of Christ...over here somewhere”

When in reality Christ is there, in the muck, in the darkness, in the brokenness, in the shame, in the horror

Not validating it, that's not what we see him doing while he's on the earth, but through words and actions seeking to reconcile it with the light, the truth, the wholeness, the hope, the grace, the mercy of God – teaching a new way!

Jesus is not just the savior of our sins he is the redeemer of *the world*

“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. Indeed, God

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

Debie Thomas reminds us in her commentary that “in [the] 2013 book, *Christianity after Religion*, historian Diana Butler Bass points out that the English word ‘believe’ that so often sticks out in that verse from John, “comes from the German ‘belieben’ — the German word for love. To believe is not to hold an opinion. To believe is to treasure. To hold something beloved. To give my heart over to it without reservation. To believe in something is to invest it with my love.”²

To believe in God is to be in love with God and the world God made

To believe in God is to join Jesus *in the world* and not just be opinionated about it but to invest it with my love

God so loved the world, God SO loved the world, God SO loved the WORLD

The world is so hard to love sometimes, not all of it but definitely the parts of it that are taking away the rights of transgender people, terrorizing immigrants, withholding truth and covering up terrible actions, and using significant might and power to bully and bomb world leaders to change

I wish I could distance myself from the hate, darkness, falsehood, slavery, and scarcity of the world – and morally, I do!

And yet Jesus is there, the life, truth, freedom, and abundance of God is in the midst of us, in the midst of this, calling us to believe, to invest in God’s creation with love

Give us the strength O God, Amen.

² <https://journeywithjesus.net/essays/2548-where-the-wind-blows>

