

HOW GOD JUDGES

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

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

That’s probably the most beloved verse in the Bible, but some people wield it like a weapon so that it sounds more like a threat than a promise. If you’ve ever watched American football on TV, you’ve probably seen people in the end zone, strategically positioned so they’ll be on camera, waving placards with the words “John 3:16” scrawled on them. They’re right there among the signs that say “Crush ‘em Lions” or “Slay the Bears.”

Some people are intimidated by John 3:16 because it’s presented as a warning, one of those offers you can’t refuse. Fear is a great motivator to get people to respond, so some evangelistic zealots put the emphasis on perish, not on eternal life.

It’s tempting to read John 3:16 as if it were an ultimatum to choose up sides. We put a lot of stock in which side we belong to, which tribe we’re in. It’s going to feel especially good to be Swiss this summer when the national team is in the World Cup, especially when teams like the US and the Netherlands are not going to be there. Even in our religion we identify ourselves by the distinctive group we belong to. When someone asks my vocation, I’ll sometimes say I’m a *Presbyterian* pastor – just so they don’t think I represent some less sophisticated denomination.

We tend to classify ourselves by the groups that define us, but that’s not how God sees us. Don’t get me wrong. God values those things that make us distinctive. The fact that you’re Chinese or heterosexual or a conservative is something that makes you unique and special. But those distinctive things aren’t what make God love us. John 3:16 says that God so loved the *world*. It doesn’t say God so loved Christians or Europeans or progressives. God so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son. The world includes everybody.

But still, you can’t avoid the fact that John 3:16 implies some sorting out. It presumes that not everyone is going to react the same way to God’s love. It says that everyone who believes in God’s Son has eternal life. That implies that there are those

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who don't believe. And what happens to them? How are they judged? And who does the judging?

I think that we have a preconceived image that keeps us from getting what John 3:16 is trying to say. Many of us have an image of God engrained in our imagination that sees God as a stern old man sitting on a throne passing judgment on every person as they wait to enter the pearly gates. He's got this ledger with everything about you that's good on one side and everything that's bad on the other. He balances one side against the other, factors in any mitigating circumstances, and passes judgment. And there are passages in the Bible that support that image.

Matthew 25 describes the Last Judgment where Jesus sorts out people like a shepherd sorts sheep from goats. Those who have fed the hungry, taken in the stranger, visited the prisoner will be welcomed into eternal glory. Those who neglected the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger and the sick go to eternal punishment. But the point of that story isn't so much that Jesus acts like a judge. He's sorting people by the way they've responded to him. Those who, like Jesus, noticed and cared for the others, especially for the outcast and the poor, they will continue to live in the fellowship of Jesus and those to whom he has brought good news. Those who were too absorbed on themselves to notice that God loves the world will continue to live in that hell where the only one who matters is yourself.

John 3:17 says, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world" – the world God loves – "but in order that the world might be saved through him." God didn't send Jesus to condemn us. God sent Jesus be our light. Light shows things for what they are. In the light of Jesus, we see ourselves as we truly are, and like the spring sunshine that draws life out of trees that have been barren through the winter darkness, the light gives us life.

Now, we all want to be seen in our best light. That's why some of us get nervous when old friends from our youth visit and they start reminiscing about old times – especially when our kids are around or other people who have gotten to know us in our

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more responsible years. Old friends sometimes know some things about us that we'd just as soon keep in the dark. But of course, all we have to do is remind them is that we know a few things about them as well, so we reach a kind of standoff like the Soviet Union and the West in the Cold War – mutually assured destruction.

We need someone to shine light on us so we can see ourselves as we really are and make some changes. We need a spouse or a partner or a trusted friend who can be honest with us so those things that hurt us are out in the light where we can deal with them. We are very good at keeping ourselves in the dark to justify our harmful ways. The first step in recovery from addiction is seeing who you are and admitting it. That's why at 12 step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, people introduce themselves by saying, "Hello, I'm so and so and I'm an alcoholic." You have to keep shedding light on your addiction or it keeps slipping back into the dark where it can work its destructive power.

It takes courage to come to the light, to stand the exposure of who we truly are. Some things inside us are so powerful and so threatening that the only way we've survived is by keeping them in the shadows – those things that shame us, that haunt us, those forces deep inside us that we can't control. It can be dangerous to expose them to the light. Just shining light on something can sometimes do more harm than good if there is no way to deal with what you see, nothing to fill the void that is left once the things we relied on are exposed for what they are. It doesn't do any good to tear down the defenses we've built around ourselves unless there's something stronger to take their place. Otherwise we're left with an emptiness that will be filled by even more destructive things.

When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they became infected with resentment and anger. They had been slaves back in Egypt, but after they had been wandering in the wilderness for a while they forgot about the chains that had bound them. All they remembered was the food their slave masters gave them. The Egyptians had tried to control their population by murdering their babies, but they seemed to have

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forgotten that. They had been forced to build Pharaoh's pyramids, but all they recalled was that they had water to drink when they got thirsty. Instead of gratitude for their freedom, for the manna God provided, for their delivery from Pharaoh's army and marauding desert tribes, they resented what they'd given up. That resentment and anger infected them like a plague. It ate at the core of their community and undermined their well-being. It drove their focus in on themselves and away from the land that God had promised.

Resentment and anger are like venomous snakes that slither among a community and kills off its spirit. The world changes, and people feel threatened. In hindsight people remember a gauzy world with the bad things filtered out and they resent that things are different from those halcyon days of their memory. Fear and resentment builds on itself. Inevitably some present themselves as rescuers who can restore that lost time. Korah and Dathan and Abiram were three men who told the Israelites that Moses was the source of their problems. They told the Israelites that if they overthrew Moses, the one whom God had chosen to lead them out of Egypt, and made them their leaders instead, then they would make everything better. They would have the food and the water, the leeks and the onions that they missed so much from Egypt. They made no mention of the chains and the whips that they had left behind.

It's that kind of nostalgia for the way things used to be, that resentment that things are different now, that is driving the resurgent kind of populism in so many countries today. A new report from the Economist magazine says that democracy is under siege around the world. The number of full democracies is declining. As people are divided by fears and resentments of a changing world, they look to more authoritarian alternatives that promise security in exchange for freedom. If there's nothing better to replace what's bad, then you wind up with something worse.

God knew what was going on among the people of Israel. Today's reading from the book of Numbers says that God sent venomous snakes among the people that bit them so that many died. Those snakes were physical manifestations of the spiritual

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venom that was coursing through the community. By making their poisonous rumblings, their discontent and their resentments visible in the form of serpents, God let the people see and understand what was going on among them. Their greatest threat wasn't the hot winds of the desert or the lack of variety in their diet or the water shortages that they had to endure. Their greatest threat was themselves, their submission to anger and resentment, their lack of faith in God's assurance that they were on the way to a Promised Land.

So, Moses fashioned a serpent made of bronze, a symbol of the power that was killing them, and lifted it up on a pole. Whoever looked at that bronze serpent lifted up above them, whoever recognized and acknowledged their resentment and anger and bitterness that ate at them, whoever saw what was hidden inside and brought it into the open was saved from destruction.

That's the image in John 3:14 and 15 for what Jesus has done for us on the cross. Jesus is lifted up among us, and all the forces that can destroy us, the anger, the resentments, the bitterness, the selfishness, all those venomous powers are nailed on that cross with him. Pain and rejection and death, all those things that lurk in the dark recess of the human soul, were lifted up for all to see, to see that he has overcome resentment and fear, selfishness and greed, all the powers of sin that keep us from God and from one another. That cross draws from us all the venom that poisons the world –the world that God loves so much that God sent the only Son.

Not only does the cross of Jesus draw out all the venom that poisons us, in his light we're revealed for who we really are. Ephesians 2:10 says "We are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." That light that radiates from the cross exposes our sins, but it also reveals who God made us to be. After last week's celebration of IPC's relationship with the Shan people of Myanmar, we are feeling euphoric about the generous response of the congregation to their need. That feeling of purpose and celebration is an insight into what we were made for. We are made to reach out to those who are

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suffering and who need the gospel, not to retrench into ourselves and protect what we already have. That feeling of peace and love and acceptance that you experience in Home Groups, that's the kind of community we were created to belong to, a community that cares about one another, that gives freely to one another, that finds its deepest purpose in prayer and scripture. That sense of exaltation we experience during a hymn, that experience of being lifted up to a realm outside of yourself – that's not just some endorphins playing on your brain, that's what it's like in the presence of God which we're blessed to glimpse from time to time in worship. When we are motivated by love and compassion and a spirit of welcome, we get a glimpse of what that promised eternal life is like. To quote John 3:21, "Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God."

"This is the judgment," says John, "that the light has come into the world." That light shines on the dark corners of our souls. It shows us for what we are, with our weaknesses and our prejudices, our sin. And that light also shows us as God created us to do the work of God, to follow the way of Jesus. In the light of Christ, we see ourselves for who we truly are. That is our judgment. That is our hope.