

News?

I think it's safe to say that John 3:16 is the single most known Bible verse anywhere in the New Testament. And yet it is so often repeated without context, either setting it up, or perhaps even more importantly, concluding the thought. Verse 17 completes the thought, about God not condemning the world but saving it through Jesus. That's good, but here is what hit me this week when I read from the beginning of Chapter 3: Jesus expects that this is actually already available information.

I admit that, somewhere along the line, I have bought the idea that the things Jesus was going on about were new ideas, after all we call it the good news, but Jesus seems to take the position that what he is up to should have been noticed by someone or other. Nicodemus comes and asks him these questions about what is going on and Jesus tells him about this new life, this heart change that needs to take place, where we stop allowing ourselves to be run by our most basic drives and start living in the Spirit.

Nicodemus is confused, he tries to grapple with it literally and Jesus is sort of like, "ok, knock it off, you know better than that. You're a teacher of Israel, you know all about how this symbolism of being born of the Spirit. This shouldn't be news to you." I think I may have missed something here, in all the times that I have read this story and these verses before. Reason with me a little bit here, doesn't it seem like Jesus is pointing to the loving grace of God as it already is? Don't we often treat the good news of the Gospel as though it sort of bursts on the scene with the resurrection? Don't we often trudge our way through Lent and the stories of the life and death as though they're just part of the long dark tunnel we have to get through until we burst into the light?

But this happens in Chapter Three of John's Gospel! Granted, John is not known for his subtle storytelling or trying to build suspense. He tells us in the prologue that Jesus is the very Word of God, the Logos, incarnate in human flesh, the light in the darkness, all of that. There is no "messianic secret," or a slow unfolding revelation, it's pretty much all on the table from the beginning.

Still, there's something here, something that creeps up on us, that we should be seeing that perhaps we miss: Jesus is showing us how God is, how God was, and how God always will be. In the second century a man name Marcion advanced the proposition that Jesus was in fact a radical departure from the blood soaked vengeful God Yahweh that we read about in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus' ethic of love and forgiveness was incompatible with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who slaughtered the firstborn of Egypt and commanded the slaughter Canaan and allowed David to rule even though his infidelity led to chaos in the land. The Old Testament God was a "demiurge" a lesser God that the one true God used to accomplish the work of creation and bring humanity to a certain point.

Marcion was also a Docetist, who believed that Jesus physical appearance was merely a show, a phantasm put on by the One True God, whose holiness could not ever be tainted by actual flesh. The reason the One True God required a demiurge and would only appear to be human was because of the general gnostic belief that only pure spirit was holy and true, that all flesh was weak and corrupt. They actually leaned rather heavily on the text of John's Gospel to support that claim.

What does that mean to us nearly 2000 years later? Well, actually quite a bit, because heresies are kind of like bad habits, they keep showing up again and again. And this particular mistake, or some variation of it has an awful lot of staying power. There is a rather strong temptation in a lot of Christian thinking, to pull Jesus out of his actual story and his actual humanity and treat him like magic or some kind of

superhero. I don't think that's what he was trying to teach us. The son of God comes to save, not to condemn, he comes to serve not to be served. He is offering us the chance to be born of water and the Spirit, not simply to appreciate the fact that he is one with God, but rather to find our way into that holy relationship in Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The fact of the matter is that, even though Marcionism was repudiated by the church in the very early going, it didn't just pack its bags and go away. Many forms of Christianity have suffered from a sort of implied Marcionism, maybe you have even suffered from it at some point. I know I did, and if I don't catch myself, I can slip back into it pretty easily. Here's how it works, you hear these complicated and often troubling stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, stories about God striking down the firstborn, stories about God insisting that all the Canaanites be slaughtered. Lots and lots of justification and rationalization by the chosen people of God, from Abraham to Joshua to David to Elijah of some really bad and violent behavior. You hear lots about how you can't see God and live because God is a consuming fire, you hear lots about how super angry God gets about our idolatry and wickedness, and you just figure that God is only forbearing our wholesale destruction because, at some point we're going to click into gear and stop being so utterly wretched. That is the hope that most of the Hebrew Scriptures are written in: that someday God will establish a kingdom in Israel that will never end, and it will be safe and it will be a light to the nations, the lion will lie down with the lamb and suchlike.

Except it never happens. Things swing up and swing down, good kings, bad kings, exiles and returns, prophets and wise teachers come and go, and pretty much one thing remains fairly constant: people are a bunch of wretched, violent, greedy, self-centered, arrogant, heartless... you get the idea. The people who lived with the hope that God was somehow going to fix all of that had a name for the hope, that name was Messiah. They were expecting him to come in and start busting heads and setting things right. They really, earnestly, faithfully wanted God to change the world.

Jesus has a different plan. He is not here to condemn the world but to save it, but how? Not the way we think, not by taking charge and fixing everything from the top down. He comes to fix what's broken from the bottom up. It's not the world that needs to change and be re-born, it's us. We need to be born of water and the spirit, we need to be born like Jesus. The world is not the creation, the world is the system of human thinking and action that is infested with sin and rebellion and lack of trust in God. We put our trust in that system more often than we do in God. Nicodemus, despite being a pretty good guy, had also put his trust in that system, because it offered him control of something, a place and security of some sort.

Desire for control of God is at the core of all sorts of idolatry and heresy, but you might as well try to control the wind. The teachers of the Law should have known that God could not be tamed, but that God could be trusted. For some reason though, they did not. They needed to start fresh, to be born again into a new life where they realized the character of God, so that God could be trusted to be just and merciful and steadfast in love. Jesus mission was to bring that reality into a system that had been profoundly broken by human misapprehension and sin. God sent the son to do this work. Not to condemn, not to tear down what was, but to save it, to regenerate it, to reform it, to work like salt and yeast in the system and bring new life.