

Holy Trinity B 30 May 2021
John 3:16
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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. Let's pray:

Isn't John 3:16 the rock star of Bible verses? It's like the lead singer of a band who everyone knows like Jimmy Barnes, Bon Scott, or Elvis. We know John 3:16 by its verse number because it's famous.

But maybe, like all celebrities, we think we know it because of its image being worn into our brains, its pervasiveness, its media profile. But, maybe none of us really know John 3:16 just like none of us really know Elvis.

So, what comes to mind when you hear John 3:16? [Wait for answers]

Love? Confidence? Security? Relief, maybe? Let's tear the band-aid off now. Am I correct in suggesting that some of you hear it as a judgement and suffer the tyranny of never knowing whether you have enough of the right faith, in order to be saved? In other words, for some reason, a verse about the love of God is heard by some as a verse about judgement which then produces anxiety.

Let me give you a brief but sarcastic synopsis of a Sunday School understanding of John 3:16 to make my point, then I'll follow it up quickly with an alternative:

God created us and all that exists, but because Eve ate something she shouldn't have, we're basically doomed for all time. And since we're all so terrible at following rules God needs to punish us. But here's where Jesus

comes in. Jesus is God's Son, and God loved his Son very much... but he had to kill his Son because you stole a chocolate bar, or lied to your mum, or maybe you swore or pulled your sister's hair. The important thing to know is that God killed his Son rather than punishing you, because let's face it, someone had to pay. Now, you should feel so grateful about all of this that you believe and (most importantly), behave. But the good news is that if you believe all of this and if you try really hard to be good then when you die, you'll get a special all-inclusive holiday called "Eternal Life". '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.'

Okay, that was a bit rough, but I hope you can see how some people might perceive John 3:16 as a warning rather than a gospel promise.

Now, if you're like me, you need something beautiful not scary.

I need something that doesn't seem so fear-based and controlling because I can easily come up with fear-based and controlling myself. And I desperately need God to be not like me.

So, I offer an alternate interpretation of John 3:16. A story just for us today, as who we are, in this place:

In the beginning God – the source and ground of all being – set the universe into motion through sound and self-giving, in a love song that set it all in motion saying, "Let there be light."

God so loved the world that God gave his own breath to speak into existence that which was not. Then God so loved the world that God gave his breath another time, breathing life into dust to create humanity. From dust and the breath of divine love we were created. In the image of the Songwriter we were created, and we too were given voice and language and breath and song.

And that love song of creation continued, but we wanted to create our own melodies in another rhythm, in another key, in our own scale.

So there's the song of life which rings through eternity and then there're human-generated, temporary, alternate songs. With our own breath, language, and voice, we tend to create our own rhythm and melodies that we think will save us - songs of domination, violence, greed, and power.

And so once again, God's breath was given to us through sound and self-giving: only this time, the sound interrupted the roar of the Roman empire. This time, God's divine love song was heard in the cry of a new born baby. For God so loved the world that God gave himself to it in the form of a Son. This was such a momentous occasion that angels sang back up; the whole heavenly host joined in the divine love song interrupting our regularly scheduled programme of soldiers and taxes and purity codes.

God so loved this corrupt world of empires and victims and violence that God gave himself to us. God so loved the world that God came to us in the most vulnerable and fragile way possible. God so loved the world that God created that he walked among us as love.

But not the us kind of love. Our love is limited by self-interest, biology and time. No, this love disregards opinion, and insists on ignoring information we think of as important; data about worth, wealth, beauty, status.

For God so loved the world... for God so loved soldiers and prostitutes and traitors and unwed mothers and soccer mums and CEOs and ex-cons and pastors and cleaners that God gave of himself in the form of Jesus. And Jesus was like a clearer melody so that we might be saved from the noise of sin and self-preservation. So that we might not perish. So that we might be reminded again of the true beat, the real rhythm, the clear lyrics of the song of creation and salvation that is life and that is eternal.

And those who heard this tune, began to sing it to others, they wrote about it in Gospels and hymns and we here in this room - maybe for only a moment, a breath, a flicker - hear it for ourselves and we know it is life and it is here and it always has been and always will be. It is eternal life and it is for you. Don't try to believe it. Just hear it. Martin Luther once said, "a person becomes a Christian, not by working but by listening."

As it's inevitable that we'll go along, singing the wrong thing and thinking it beautiful, God's love song will fade until we can't hear it anymore. That's just how it goes, people. We have so many alternatives to the life that is offered to us in the song of love that beats out the rhythm of God. Other tunes, other cries, other songs... like the one that tells us that we're alone, or the song which sings of reaching for our own glory, the song of condemnation that says we're not worthy to be called children of God –there're so many in fact, that they form a layer of white noise drowning out the still, small voice of our Lord.

But the things that drown out his voice can never last. The competing songs are inconsequential, they can never outlast the one that has rung since the beginning of time because they aren't life, nor are they eternal.

That which was from the beginning, is now, and will be forever, the divine love song, calls us back. Again, and again. It takes time to hear this song, and that's not a cause for concern, but one for rejoicing. What's the point in a song whose truth and beauty can be exhausted in a moment?

For God so loved the world that God gave God's self to us as Jesus so that all who hear God's song of what is real and true and everlasting – will know that it's their song and that it can't be taken away. None of our alternate anthems can compete with God's truth and in response to this what can we do but fall to our knees in worship?

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. Listen to his song. It's God's lullaby for you, his children. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.