

Lent 4 B Sermon  
March 10, 2024  
John 3:14-21

*What More Can I Say?*  
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*‘And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that God gave their 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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’*

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John 3:16 is one of, if not the most ubiquitous verses of the Bible. EVERYONE knows it! I’d love to say that the reason is because so very many people are so very familiar with scripture, but I’m not sure that’s the case. I memorized it, along with hundreds of other verses, in our Southern Baptist Church’s Wednesday night kids’ program—maybe that’s how others learned it too. Maybe it’s because Rollen Stewart cited the verse on his infamous t-shirts and banners – you remember the guy in the rainbow wig at sports games back in the 80s?

Maybe it's because Tim Tebow painted it under his eyes for the 2009 BCS Championships. Exactly 3 years later, he was playing for the Denver Broncos against the Pittsburgh Steelers. Denver had lost their previous 3 games by an average of 16, but during this game they won with Tebow passing 316 yards and 31.6 yards per completion. Pittsburgh's time of possession was 31 minutes 6 seconds, and the Nielsen ratings for the game also peaked at 31.6. John 3:16 was the top search item on Google the next morning. Maybe that's how it became so well known.

Or maybe it's just because it's a really potent verse. After all, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, did call it "the gospel in a nutshell." It's such a well-known, well-loved verse that preaching a sermon on it reminds me of a story.

One particular Sunday the sermon had been going on endlessly. Finally, the minister's voice cracked and he said, "What more can I say?" One parishioner yelled, "How about 'Amen'!"<sup>1</sup>

Preparing to write this sermon, I looked at the text and honestly asked, "What more can I say?" But the truth is, there is a lot more we can say about this verse than is usually said. And I intend to do just that.

Let's start with what is usually said: God loves you. God sent God's only son to die for you. If you believe in him, you will not perish. If you believe in him, you will have eternal life. Done and done.

Growing up, I knew this was a great verse for evangelizing the "unsaved." The message was simple – God loves you and sent Jesus to die for you. The response was simple – believe! And the results were, well, really good news – stay out of hell when you die! This verse had it all. And use it I did. Needless to say, telling my friends that they had to believe in Jesus to stay out of hell usually yielded one of two responses.

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<sup>1</sup> Milton Berle. *Milton Berle's Private Joke File*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 1989.

1. Some of my friends did believe. I led them in praying what Baptists call “the sinner’s prayer.” Basically, *“Dear Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross in my place. Come into my heart and forgive me of my sins.”* Once converted, I could rest assured that my friends would avoid hell. As I said, though, there were two possible responses.
2. Some of my friends weren’t my friends anymore.

“God loves you. God sent God’s only son to die for you. If you believe in him, you will not perish. If you believe in him, you will have eternal life.” That is what is usually said about this verse.

Now, let’s move on to what’s not usually said. Scholars tell us that “belief,” in this context is not simply the intellectual assent to something. The word in Greek usually translated as belief, is really about obeying, complying, and trusting. The kind of believing talked about in his verse isn’t the same as believing that your child is telling you the truth about the missing cookies, or believing that the earth is billions of years old, or believing that blonds really do have more fun. Furthermore, this kind of believing is not creedal or dogmatic – it’s not about having the right belief about Jesus or the incarnation or the Trinity or the cross or anything else. This kind of believing means buying into Jesus’ message – obeying his teaching, complying with his mandate to love, and trusting that this really is a way to a better world – to eternal life.

Eternal life – that’s the second thing I’d like to talk about from this verse. The verse is typically translated to state that believers “will have” eternal life – future tense. Interestingly, in Greek the verb for “to have,” is present tense. The verse doesn’t suggest that believers “will have” eternal life. It says that believers “have” eternal life – present tense – right here, right now.

Friends, this is a radical verse and I’m coming to believe that Martin Luther was right – it really is the gospel in a nutshell, but not because it

tells us how to “get saved” by simply believing in Jesus and certainly not because it tells us how to stay out of hell. This verse is radical because it says that those who believe in Jesus, those who obey, comply with, and trust in his teachings enough to actually do them – they experience eternal life right here, right now because they are bringing that abundant life, that realm of heaven to the very earth they walk upon and the people they share it with.

Let me be clear though, I’m not saying those believers won’t experience it in the hereafter, only that’s not the focus of this verse or of Jesus’ gospel. It’s about here and now.

Tim Tebow says that he chose John 3:16 because “it’s what gives us [Christians] hope.” I have to say that I want to agree with him, but not because believing in Jesus saves me or anyone else from damnation. It gives me hope because *believing* in Jesus means *living* like Jesus and bringing the hoped-for future into the right-now present. It gives me hope because it reminds me of what’s possible here and now, for the world. But that kind of world-change doesn’t just happen, it takes people living the truth of Jesus’ message and not just “believing” in Jesus as some sort of post-mortem fire insurance plan.

So, there you have it: what’s *not* usually said about John 3:16 and why I still think it’s the gospel in a nutshell. Do you *believe*? May it be so. Amen.