

“Light for Us All”

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Genesis 12:1-9

John 3:1-21

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,  
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

*John 3:16*

Let us pray, O God,  
Teach us about your unlimited love for us as human beings –  
all SLGBTQ of us where “There is neither Jew nor Greek, ...  
neither slave nor free, ... neither male nor female;  
for [we] are all one [as we Christians say,] in Christ Jesus”;  
or as the Prophet Isaiah promised: together with you “Emmanuel”,  
as part of the same family of Abraham & Sarah.

Amen

“In the Beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth...”

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want...”

These verses of the Bible are instantly recognizable to those of us  
who have grown up in the Church – and even those who haven’t;  
and so is this one, too:

“For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son,  
that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”

For evangelical Christians, this is the very heart of the Gospel message  
that is to be shared throughout the world –  
and I have known those genuinely concerned  
for the immortal souls of all people,  
and those who see no further than a self-righteous domination  
of all people ‘in the name of Christ’.

Perhaps because John 3:16 is so familiar in popular culture,  
critics of Christianity have been emboldened to push back  
and dismiss it as quaint religiosity – or even as a threat.

Progressive Christians would be happy enough with the first part:  
“For God so loved the world...”

I am mindful that we sometimes have guests who practice a faith tradition  
different from ours.

When I know this, I am careful about the language I use,  
though by no means do I water down my interpretation of the Good News.

Neither do I extoll Christian exceptionalism as an exclusive virtue.

It is my belief that the Good News of Christ is about what is universally true.

I am very proud of the United Church of Christ and its openness  
to other faith traditions like Native American spirituality,  
and even advocacy of Judaism.

Willard, p.2

During the 4<sup>th</sup> period of the Council of Vatican II,  
the Roman Catholic Church denounced antisemitism  
and all bigotry against anyone on the basis of race, creed, or culture.  
However, they didn't go so far as to recognize other religions  
except to acknowledge those truths as may be found in them  
that agreed with Roman Catholic tradition.

With regard to Judaism, the United Church of Christ went further to say  
we acknowledge the historical injustices made by the Church  
against the Jewish community;  
that we are not obligated to convert Jewish people;  
and we recognize Judaism as a sibling community of faith.  
In other words, it is our common desire to serve God –  
this is where we meet and this is also our point of departure.

What makes our interfaith projects work so well, which we do together  
with Temple Shalom and ISLAM, Inc. is our differences  
in concert with one another as we seek to serve that unique spirituality  
which we each call God.

That is our strength and it is a bold affirmation of the existence of God  
beyond any one tradition; It takes us all to figure out who and what God is...

I am reminded about the proverbial blind men who happen upon an elephant-  
each describing it by what they feel it to be –

a snake for its trunk, a plow for a tusk, a fan for an ear,  
a wall for its side, a tree for a leg, a rope for its tail.

It would be enough to say those parts of the elephant are *like* these things,  
without saying that they *are* these things.

However, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are 'revealed religions' –  
that means that each of these faiths claim that there are things  
that have been revealed and can be known about God –  
but it is the same problem about 'who is right?'

Perhaps a better metaphor is the Sun:

which is seen in the sky as a round disc –

though we know it is a sphere that is in motion through space;  
that it gives light and heat to our world, enabling life to exist –  
even when it is unseen by clouds and the Earth's night-time path;  
and the Sun is known to human beings by many names –  
yet it is not bound by any one of those names or cultural beliefs.

This is the nature of what we know about that reality we call the Sun –  
and it is how we can talk about the nature of God as well.

Willard, p.3

Though not as familiar to us as other Bible verses,  
this text from Genesis 12:1-2 describes the common heritage  
we Christians share with Jews and Muslims:

<sup>1</sup>*The LORD said to Abram:*

*Leave your country, your family, and your relatives  
and go to the land that I will show you.*

<sup>2</sup>*I will bless you and make your descendants into a great nation.  
You will become famous and be a blessing to others.*

Abram who would become Abraham – the ‘Father of Nations’  
& Sarai his wife whose name meant ‘My Princess’ and  
who would become Sarah – ‘The Princess’  
together, are the spiritual ancestors for Judaism, Christianity, & Islam.  
We are in it together.

Our Gospel lesson today, however, seems more specific about  
who benefits from God’s favor – who gets saved...

Now, it is important to note that John 3:16 was determined  
by translators to be something that was said about Jesus –  
and not by Jesus himself.

The verses that follow are part of a teaching about him,  
or commentary rather than a continuing part of his dialogue with Nicodemus.

As it is written in John 3:16-21...

<sup>16</sup>*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,  
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

<sup>17</sup>*For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world,  
but that the world might be saved through him.*

<sup>18</sup>*[The one] who believes in him is not condemned;  
[the one] who does not believe is condemned already,  
because [they have] not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

[That’s the tough part, right there.

What John 3:18 is saying, is that belief in the ‘name’ is the deciding factor.

Hold on a minute now though – in Matthew 1:21-23, the angel of the Lord  
speaks to Joseph in a dream and tells him his wife Mary will give birth to a son  
and they are to call him Jesus – which literally means ‘God saves’.

Then the angel quotes the Jewish prophet Isaiah 7:14...

<sup>23</sup>*“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and his name shall be called Emman’u-el”*

therefore, making no distinction between ‘Jesus’ and  
the name ‘Emmanuel’ which literally means ‘God with us’.]

Willard, p.4

The Gospel of John 3 continues with

*<sup>19</sup> And this is the judgment,  
that the light has come into the world,  
and [people] loved darkness rather than light,  
because their deeds were evil.*

*<sup>20</sup> For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light,  
lest [their] deeds should be exposed.*

[That sounds pretty judgmental right there,  
doing what is evil seems to be the discriminating factor.]

*<sup>21</sup> But [the one] who does what is true comes to the light,  
that it may be clearly seen that [their] deeds  
have been wrought [or accomplished] in God.*

‘[The one] who does what is true comes to the light..’

Belief personified in deeds that are ‘true’ approach the ‘light’,  
and ‘Jesus’ is equated with ‘light’ in the Gospel of John.

Whether we call the ‘light’ of day as

‘el Sol’ or ‘le Soleil’ or ‘ha Helios’ or ‘Tai-yang’ or ‘Tai-yo’ or ‘the Sun’  
it is still the Sun: s-u-n.

Whether we call the light of enlightenment as

truth or even the Son: s-o-n, it is still what it is,  
independent of our limited human perspective,  
whether that is Jewish or Buddhist or Unitarian.

We may not agree on who or what God is – but together we can get  
a better picture of that God of truth who is with us to save us,  
and to get a better picture of ourselves,  
all SLGBTQ of us in the process!

As [church member] Ted Balsler says,

‘We may not have it all together, but together we have it all’ –  
and how wonderful it is when people are working together...  
‘Behold how good and how pleasant it is for people to dwell together,  
in unity, in unity, la-la-lai-la-la-lai-la-la-lai-la.’

Amen

*Our lesson today from Genesis 12:1-9 describes God's promise  
of a homeland to Abram – who would eventually be renamed as Abraham,  
which means, "Father of Nations"...*

<sup>1</sup>The LORD said to Abram:

Leave your country, your family, and your relatives  
and go to the land that I will show you.

<sup>2</sup> I will bless you and make your descendants into a great nation.  
You will become famous and be a blessing to others.

<sup>3</sup> I will bless anyone who blesses you,  
but I will put a curse on anyone who puts a curse on you.  
Everyone on earth will be blessed because of you.<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>4-5</sup> Abram was seventy-five years old

when the LORD told him to leave the city of Haran.

He obeyed and left with his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot,

and all the possessions and slaves they had gotten while in Haran.

When they came to the land of Canaan,

<sup>6</sup> Abram went as far as the sacred tree of Moreh in a place called Shechem.

The Canaanites were still living in the land at that time,

<sup>7</sup> but the LORD appeared to Abram and promised,

"I will give this land to your family forever."

Abram then built an altar there for the LORD.

<sup>8</sup> Abram traveled to the hill country east of Bethel

and camped between Bethel and Ai, where he built another altar

and worshiped the LORD.

<sup>9</sup> Later, Abram started out toward the Southern Desert.

*Let us be challenged and guided by these words...*

John 3:1-21

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicode'mus,  
a ruler of the [Judeans].

<sup>2</sup>This man came to Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> by night and said to him,  
“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God;  
for no one can do these signs that you do,  
unless God is with him.”

<sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him,  
“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless [someone] is born anew,<sup>[b]</sup>  
[the] cannot see the kingdom of God.”

<sup>4</sup>Nicode'mus said to him,  
“How can a [someone] be born when [they are] old?  
Can [they] enter a second time into [their] mother's womb and be born?”

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered,  
“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless [someone] is born of water and the Spirit,  
[they] cannot enter the kingdom of God.

<sup>6</sup>That which is born of the flesh is flesh,  
and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.<sup>[c]</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Do not marvel that I said to you,  
‘You must be born anew.’<sup>[d]</sup>

<sup>8</sup>The wind<sup>[e]</sup> blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it,  
but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes;  
so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup>Nicode'mus said to him,  
“How can this be?”

<sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him,  
“Are you a teacher of Israel,  
and yet you do not understand this?

<sup>11</sup>Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know,  
and bear witness to what we have seen;  
but you do not receive our testimony.

<sup>12</sup>If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe,  
how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

<sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven but [the one] who descended from heaven,  
the Son of man.<sup>[f]</sup>

<sup>14</sup>And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,  
so must the Son of man be lifted up,  
<sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”<sup>[g]</sup>

<sup>16</sup>For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,  
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

<sup>17</sup>For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world,  
but that the world might be saved through him.

<sup>18</sup>[The one] who believes in him is not condemned;  
[the one] who does not believe is condemned already,  
because [they have] not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

- <sup>19</sup> And this is the judgment,  
that the light has come into the world,  
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- <sup>20</sup> For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light,  
lest [their] deeds should be exposed.
- <sup>21</sup> But [the one] who does what is true comes to the light,  
that it may be clearly seen that [their] deeds have been wrought in God.