



**ST. COLUMBA'S  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

## *The Gospel of John*

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*Lent 4, Year B  
John 3:14-21*

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*If I say surely the darkness will cover me and the light around me turn to night; darkness is not dark to you, Lord; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike.*

Psalm 139

Two different summers in high school I spent a week hiking through the Rocky mountains in Colorado. Besides the nine members in my group, during that time I didn't see another living soul. We carried everything we'd need to sleep and eat and walk nearly a hundred miles. Several nights we slept above the tree line and fell asleep watching meteor after meteor skip off the earth's atmosphere. They called it *No Trace Camping* which meant that we didn't build campfires and we dug holes to poop in. Each night we shared our faith stories and prayed for one another. I remember it as a holy time that felt spiritually immersive in God's creation in a way I had not experienced before.

In the second summer, one of the leaders though was quite intent on testing us spiritually. He wanted us to put our faith "out there" and try and lead a stranger to Christ. When we got back to civilization we were to go up to someone and after a brief conversation ask them if they had accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. This too was unfamiliar to me. My camp leader though seemed quite sure it was an imperative sign of faith to do this regularly.

So I tried it. At the end of the week when we arrived at the trailhead I went up to two older men (I was 17 at the time so they probably were in their 30s!). I asked them about their hike and where they were from. After a few minutes of talking, I broke. I couldn't ask them the question I had been sent to ask. The thought of it made me feel sick to my stomach. I wasn't sure if my inability was a lack of faith or something else and I certainly didn't have a nuanced language to process my feelings.

Now, I would say that that context -- asking strangers if they accepted Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior -- felt cheap and manipulative. I felt used and also felt that I was being asked to use them. I was not a part of their life and wasn't really interested in coming to know them -- in *seeing* them as beloved children of God. It was about getting a notch in my belt. It was about separating people into two tribes. The saved and the unsaved. The forgiven and the unforgiven.



Many of us have washed up on the shores of the Episcopal Church hoping to escape that cultural and religious tribalism. I found in the Episcopal Church a religious tribe that not only welcomed other faith traditions but actively sought to engage and learn from them. I found in the Episcopal Church a group of people who (for me at the time) scandalously invited women and openly gay men to lead their churches. In the Episcopal Church I found priests who believed that God's grace is so all powerful and pervasive that it wasn't a question about whether any particular person had been saved -- it was only a question about how long it would take for us to realize it.

I want to thank all of you who wrote to me this week. In a Daily Bread I read today's scripture and asked you what you heard. What caused tension, what found resonance. I got lots of responses! And they pushed and pulled me in all sorts of directions. And they strongly contributed to making this a much different sermon than it would have been.

What is Jesus up to here? John 3:16 is undoubtedly the most recognizable verse in American Christianity. It used to be seen at the back of every endzone of televised football games. And Jesus' reflection that "those who do not believe [in me] are condemned ..." (John 3), has certainly motivated a certain kind

of religious tribalism that has divided and antagonized any number of religious communities.

In the Gospel of John there is a dualism that runs throughout. Good versus evil; light against darkness. And themes like those have been used by Christians over many centuries to justify wicked, dehumanizing behavior. Is that what Jesus intended? Can we believe in some of what Jesus said but not this?

The last two sermons -- one by David and the other by Amy -- really help us here. The word that John often uses for faith is "belief." "Anyone who believes in me," Jesus says, "will not perish" (John 3). But that word "belief" is not used as we commonly use it. Belief in Jesus is not about knowing the right facts -- like knowing the atomic number of oxygen is eight (and by the way, I literally have no idea what that means!). Rather belief in Jesus is all consuming. To believe in Jesus is to adopt a new life.

What if I was to tell you that the passage we heard today is actually a story about baptism!? It is! Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus (and boy would I like to tell you more about that if I had time!). Jesus tells Nicodemus that if he wants to see the kingdom of God he must be born again -- he must be born of water and spirit (John 3).

In the Gospel of John Jesus is God. John says it again and again. Take your preconceptions of what God is like and dump them in the river. God is not a perfect mathematician. God is not Zeus. Jesus is both human and the great *I am*. Flesh and Spirit perfectly one (John 1).

In John, Jesus says that God is spirit (John 4). That eternal life is not about what happens after death; rather eternal life is now -- a present rebirth into the society of Jesus. Literally Jesus says that eternal life is belief in -- trust, abiding, following -- Jesus (John 5).

Jesus is not interested in a faith just in our head. A collection of a bunch of facts like a

religious periodic table. It is holistic. And at the very center of it is love. Just before the crucifixion Jesus gives his disciples a new commandment: Love one another (John 13). A perfect summary of his ministry. Jesus says to Peter if you really love me you will feed my sheep (John 21). That is both a spiritual and a literal command. Do not let my people go hungry.



Now, this is not to suggest that Jesus was a particularly easy going person. Sometimes he acts in extreme ways. Making a whip and using it to clear out the most holy religious site in all of Israel is among his extreme acts (John 2). Also Jesus does condemn. We see it in today's passage (John 3). Jesus condemns evil. And that sounds harsh but remember, side note, evil is bad. Like really bad.

In the Gospel of John the fights that Jesus picks are with the religious authorities who have turned God's house into a tribalistic community of violence and oppression (John chapters 2, 4, 5, 7-19). And Jesus will have none of it. Think of the woman in John 8 who the patriarches tried to stone. Jesus is not interested in sex scandels. Turning to those men he says, *Let those without sin cast the first stone.* That woman he would not condemn. Those men trying to kill her in God's name, they are acting by the powers of darkness.

That John 3:16 is used to divide people and make religious belief into a cheap sign of tribalistic loyalty is a great, terribly sad irony.

The Gospel of John often speaks in dualisms. Light and darkness; good and evil. But of course we live in a world of inches. This week, for instance, I'm feeling hopeful. Late last night I signed up to receive my first shot of the vaccine. That feels great and hopeful. But hopeful not just for myself but also for our country. This week President Biden signed the

*American Rescue Plan Act.* Among other policy goals, this bill might do more to reduce child poverty than any other piece of legislation in at least a generation.

When -- week after week -- we pray for the poor and remind ourselves of our responsibilities to treat all people as beloved children of God -- reminding ourselves that every person and certainly every child should be afforded basic civil and humanitarian rights, like the right not to be hungry -- this piece of legislation is hopeful. We hope to be taking collective action to realize -- to make incarnate -- our values in tangible, real ways.

Nevertheless, talking about this legislation is no place for John's dualism! Most often legislation can't be separated into two simple categories: good or evil. Just like whole people can't be separated into two simple categories. The right tribe and the wrong tribe. In myself there are many tribes. The patient, the impatient, the version of me who loves being surprised by the strangeness of other people and also the rabid tribalistic Cardinals fan who sincerely hates cubs fans.

The gospels also recognize that people are complex. The apostles betray Jesus (John 18). Jesus has moments of doubt [though not in John!]. The Bible is full of nuance.

But sometimes it speaks in poetry. And in context that poetry is beautiful. *For God so loved the entire created realm -- every rock, every person, every sunset, every child's birth, every child's death, every rainbow, all the birds of the air, all the fish in the sea -- for God so loved all of it she risked her only child. Jesus has come so that we might have true waters of life, rivers of it -- rivers flowing from our heart and the heart of God into the world in a never ending stream of love, mercy, and forgiveness.*

God is love (1st John 4). Choose this path and go in peace. *Amen.*