

For God So Loved the World!

Isaiah 6:1-8, John 3:1-21 (ESV)

December 24, 2006

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” In this one sentence we have the foundation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this one verse we have both the reason that we celebrate Christmas and also the reason that we celebrate Easter. I am grateful that our little children have memorized John 3:16, and I hope that the rest of us can and will follow their good example. We would all do well to hear this good news, to receive this Christmas gift, to believe in the only Son of God, and so to embark upon life eternal.

“For God so loved the world.” Here is the foundation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here is the basis of both Christmas and Easter. “For God so loved the world.” This is a remarkable assertion, deceptive in its simplicity, all-inclusive in its scope, challenging all other perspectives. It starts with God, who was before the beginning, who exists outside the universe, by whom all things were created, in whom all things subsist. God is not obvious in the world, perhaps in no small part because God is not in the world, at least not in the way that you and I are in the world. We are in the world, but the world is in God. The world—and by this I mean the universe in all its vastness—cannot contain God anymore than my hand could contain the world. God is of a different nature than the world, cannot be contained in the world, and cannot be seen in the world, and yet the world makes no sense apart from him.

Apart from God, the world is a dark and dreary place, ruthless and senseless on every scale, from “nature, red in tooth and claw” (Alfred Lord Tennyson, “In Memoriam”), to the horrible and even unspeakable inefficiencies and wastefulness of what is perceived to be evolution, to the grim finality of the second law of thermodynamics, which indicates that in a relatively highly ordered system such as the universe in which we live, the amount of disorder not only increases but necessarily increases, which is to say that the universe is running down. It is no small comfort that John 3:16 starts with “God.” God alone provides that larger perspective from which alone the universe can make sense and does make sense. God is both the origin of the universe and also its goal. God is the designer and giver of life and also that to which life bears witness. God is the provider of order in the universe and has purposes for us beyond this universe.

“For God so loved the world.” This tells of divine initiative. God does not exist content in some aloneness. Instead, God created the world as a place within which to love us, a place for us to live within the love of God, a place for us even to love God. This is not immediately obvious when we look around, but this is the great reality which envelops us. Before the world was, God loved the world, and he brought it into existence as an expression of his love and in order to express his love. That is why we are here. The love of God seeks our well-being even at great expense to himself. The love of God seeks our well-being even when it is far different from what we imagine it to be. The love of God undergirds the structures of the universe and also guides the rise and fall of empires in the course of human history.

But the point that John is making in today’s reading is much sharper than that. I have been using the word “world” to mean the universe. John uses it to mean the human world, the fallen, sinful mass of humanity not in its God-intended love of God but precisely in its hatred of God, its rejection of God, its disobedience and faithlessness.¹ Thus John is not writing so much about the planet as about all of us living here on the planet. The love of which he writes is not only that creative and providential love which holds us in existence but is also and even more so that saving love which reaches out to us precisely in our sinful rejection of the very love of God. That is to say, while this verse certainly assumes everything I have said about creation, it is not so much about creation as it is even more about redemption, mercy, forgiveness, and salvation. Thanks be to God!

That is why this love is the foundation not only of the universe but also and especially of the gospel. God loved us when we did not love him. The initiative is entirely his. The gospel begins with the love of God. Thus it is pure. It is powerful. It is the basis of good hope. Thank God that the gospel does not begin with us. It is not based upon our goodness, it is not founded upon our intelligence, it does not

¹William Temple, *Readings in St. John’s Gospel*, London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1949, p. 48:

No object is sufficient for the love of God short of *the world* itself. Christianity is not one more religion of individual salvation, differing from its fellows only in offering a different road to that goal. It is the one and only religion of world-redemption. Of course it includes a way of individual salvation as the words before and after this great saying shew. But its scope is wider than that—as wide as the love of God. It is a *sin of the world* that Christ takes away.

depend upon our morality, neither does it rest upon our faithfulness, our lovability, or any presumed attractiveness.

When we can be honest with ourselves, we realize how wonderful it is that the origin of the gospel is in the love of God. If we were good enough to deserve salvation, we would not need to be saved. Thank God that it has nothing to do with what we deserve! And if we had to be good to be saved, we would be lost without hope forever. Thank God that it has nothing to do with our being good! It is the always prior, always initiating, always outreaching, always accomplishing love of God for the world that alone is the foundation for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thank God that we cannot get away from his love! It is the always prior love of God for the world that alone is the foundation for the rest of the gospel described in this verse.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.” Here in this second line is the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here is the naming of what happened at both Christmas and at Easter. God gave his only Son. After covenants had been made, broken, remade, and broken again, after prophets, priests, judges, and kings had been sent, after the people had been enslaved and saved, then exiled and saved again, God gave his only Son. God gave himself in the gift of one who was none other than himself. God came from outside the world into the world, from beyond time into time, from being the sustainer of all life into the fragility and precariousness of an individual human life. He who made us came to us as one of us in order to restore us to himself. Thanks be to God! Surely this self-giving happened on the cross. But before it happened on the cross, it happened in the manger. Before Jesus could die as one of us, he had to be born as one of us. This is the gift we celebrate at Christmas.

So much flows out of this gift! We see here again divine initiative. We see here also divine glory which is so great that we could not behold it directly and still live, so God condescends to hide his glory in the humility of a baby born in a barn and laid in a feed trough and to hide his majesty in the misery of a man nailed to a cross. In the uniqueness of this gift we learn that there is no other savior. We shall neither look nor wait for another. In fact, we learn that there is no other God. “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4 (ESV)). There is no other. He alone loved the world. He alone gave his only Son. He alone is worthy of worship. He alone is worthy of faith. He alone is worthy of service and obedience.

There may have been a day when this was taken for granted in western Christendom. It can no longer be taken for granted. We live in a world of competing faiths. We live in a world of competing allegiances. We live in a world of competing visions of the world, of life, and of what it means to be human. They are not all alike but are instead mutually exclusive. They are not all true, beneficial, or even benign;

the others lead to eternal death for their adherents and some to earthly death for their opponents. We cannot ignore that. Moreover, the God whom we serve is a jealous God. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is not merely one God among many and will not tolerate being so regarded. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is the only Lord of the universe, and it is our well-being and life so to realize.

It follows that the gospel articulated in John 3:16 is not for Christians alone but is for all the world, even if the world does not want to hear it. It is intended to attract unbelievers so as to bring them to be believers. We cannot keep the gospel to ourselves. It was given to us not for our benefit alone but also that we could give it to others. In fact, in that the giving of his Son is the very content of the gospel, giving becomes the pattern for all of Christian life, giving of ourselves, giving of our substance, giving of our means, and especially sharing of the gospel.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Here in this third line is the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here is the ultimate goal of both Christmas and Easter. God intends that we believe in his only Son and that in so believing we have eternal life. This is why he gave us his only Son at Christmas, so that we might live with him forever. In that God has taken the initiative to love this sinful world, and in that God has taken the initiative to give his only Son, it is our role in response to trust in God’s initiative, to rely upon God’s goodness, to cast ourselves upon God’s mercy, and so to believe in God’s Son.

To believe in God’s only Son is precisely not to believe in ourselves, not to rely upon our own supposed goodness, not to seek what we think we deserve, and not to try to save ourselves. To believe in God’s only Son is instead to live in the love of God and to receive the good gift of God. In fact, it is the only way to receive that gift. And to refuse that gift would not only exhibit an ingratitude beyond all comprehension but would also reject the very love of God which forms its foundation. Surely no one would want to do that! So, to receive the good gift of God and to live in the love of God we are invited and urged to believe in the only Son of God.

To fail or to refuse to believe in him is nothing other than perishing in eternal death. But to believe in him and so to know him is nothing other than having eternal life. For eternal life is not only everlasting life beyond death but is also a quality of life here and now, knowing God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3). This is the basis for our hope. This is the basis for mission and evangelism. The very purpose of the gospel, its ultimate goal, is the reflection of the glory of God in life eternal.

Is there a grace of God which forgives our sin? Yes. Is there a grace of God which gives courage before an unknown future? Yes. Is there a grace of God which enables us to accept the incompleteness of our lives with hope? Yes. Is there a grace

of God which enables us to live with poise and dignity in the presence of the pathetic, the tragic, and the ironic?² Yes, there is, and we learn of it at Christmas in John 3:16.

Almost twenty-five years ago, on January 13, 1982, a jet plane attempting to take off from Washington National Airport during a snowstorm crashed into the 14th Street Bridge and then into the icy Potomac River. As a park police helicopter arrived to help to rescue people, it let down a rope to a man who passed it to someone else. They came back for him, and again he passed it to someone else. This happened again on the third trip, and on the fourth, and on the fifth. On the sixth trip back, they found that the man had slipped below the water and disappeared. He gave his life so that others could live. For awhile, the country had a new hero, whose name we did not even know. I am compelled to observe that such self-sacrificial behavior could not possibly serve any evolutionary purpose. However, such self-sacrificial behavior did help to generate order in the midst of chaos and does tend to point beyond the confines of the physical world to a greater context of meaning and purpose. I do not know whether the man was Christian or not. I do know that his last act of self-giving embodied a worthy response to, and a remarkable appropriation of, the gospel of giving articulated in John 3:16.

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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²John H[addon] Leith, *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988, pp. 60-61.