

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
Year A, Second Sunday in Lent, John 3:1-17
12 March 2017
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Perhaps no other verse in the Bible is as well-known as this one, and probably for good reason. It seems to summarize the entire message of the Christian faith in just a few simple words. And yet, I wonder if we can hear these words, written almost 2000 years ago, in any way that’s even close to the original meaning the author of John’s Gospel intended. I suspect most Christians today hear this verse as an answer to a question, namely “Why did Jesus, the only Son of God, come to earth?” And, the answer—an answer that most likely seems obvious to us—is this: “Jesus came to earth to die in order that we, by believing in him, might be saved and go to heaven to be with Jesus when we die.” This is a very common view among Christians, and has been since early in the Christian tradition. However, as those of us at the Lenten book discussion discovered this past Wednesday, there are biblical scholars who are beginning to question this common interpretation as they become more acquainted with Jesus’ Jewish roots. This is recurring theme for me, I know, but I ask you to hang in there with me.

Many of you have no doubt noticed that I have made repeated references in my sermons to the Anglican bishop and prolific New Testament scholar, NT Wright. I confess that, for some years, I resisted reading his many books because I was worried he would be just too conservative for me. But that turned out to be simply a bias on my part, and one that largely hasn’t been true—actually, his work seems to cut across the typical conservative-liberal boundaries in very intriguing

ways. In any case, Wright said something in a lecture a few years ago about this famous verse from John that I want to quote here. He claimed, “An awful lot of ordinary church-going Christians are simply millions of miles away from understanding any of this,” and the “this” that he referred to is what John meant by the “eternal life” that Jesus came to give us.¹ His claim that we have no clue as to its original meaning is a pretty strong statement, but I want to encourage us to overcome our own possible biases and to see what all the fuss is about.

Very quickly, as early Christianity moved into the Gentile, Greco-Roman world, it began to distance itself from, to forget about, or to misunderstand its Jewish roots. The misunderstanding of John 3:16 is just one of many that resulted from this phenomenon. The picture of heaven and hell, and even purgatory, with images of a heaven beyond the clouds and of hell-fire that were eventually accepted in the church were actually pagan ideas that reached back to more ancient times and were later picked in the Middle Ages and made popular in the art and literature of the time.

We now know that the Jews who became the earliest followers of Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, had a very different understanding. They understood that Jesus claimed the kingdom of God was very near, that it had indeed, at long last, come to earth, but also that the work of the kingdom was not completed by Jesus. Instead, that became the job of his followers. For the last 2000 years, we’re supposed to have been working to bring the kingdom to God to full realization and—here’s the main point—we are working to bring the kingdom of God to full realization *on earth*. Always remember, as you’re probably tired of hearing me say, the Lord’s Prayer is the key. We pray every Sunday for God’s will to be done

¹ <https://sojo.net/articles/nt-wright-asks-have-we-gotten-heaven-all-wrong>, accessed 3/8/2017.

on earth as it is in heaven. When that happens, when God's kingdom is fully realized on earth, that is, the new age of which Jesus spoke, will have come about. Eternal life in this new age began with Jesus and was passed to us in baptism, and will be present in its fullness when our work is over and the kingdom has been fully realized on earth.

So yes, early Christians, like most other Jews, believed in heaven, though not a *place* above the earth or, in a more contemporary sense, a place beyond the edge of the universe that they, and we, will go to when we die. Early Christians believed that, once the kingdom of God is fully realized, those that are dead would be bodily resurrected and go, not to heaven, but to a fully restored, fully transformed creation here on earth. Wright puts it this way: "We do not 'go to' heaven; we are resurrected and heaven comes down to earth..." Essentially, we will be resurrected to a new version of the Garden of Eden, not floating in some disembodied timeless ethereal space that we typically think of as heaven.

So, back to the gospel of John. What might Nicodemus have heard, assuming he understood what Jesus was trying to say by the time they were done conversing, that is, when Jesus said the verse that we label as John 3:16? Here is Wright's translation of what Nicodemus likely heard: God gave his son "so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost but should share in the life of God's new age." Elsewhere, Wright says that this original understanding of John 3:16 is "...a difference that makes all of the difference to how we live on earth [now]." In other words, the salvation that Jesus came to bring us is not a ticket to heaven or, more, a ticket out of hell; it is a mission, a vocation, to continue the work the Jewish people began and that Jesus bequeathed to his followers to help God restore creation to its original purposes. This is why were we saved and for

which we were born again in faith and baptism. The Eucharist's post-communion prayer actually captures this quite well—I want us to listen closely for it today as we say it together later: from Rite One: “...And we humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship [the church], and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in...” And, from Rite Two: “...And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.”

There is a very real sense, then, in which Jesus' own mission to earth—his life, death, and resurrection, his mission of inaugurating the kingdom of God—is not an ending, but rather a beginning. And, after he began his great kingdom work, he passed the baton to us to help him complete it. So, indeed, it is “all there” in John 3:16. We just need to hear it again for the first time. God gave his son “so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost but should share in the life of God's new age.” Amen.