



The Need for Apologists

A Sermon By
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March 14, 2021
The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Numbers 21:4-9
John 3:14-21

Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church
Lawton, Oklahoma

Today's gospel includes one of those verses you see scripted across billboards, grafted onto coffee mugs, even graffitied on overpasses.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” – John 3:16.

When I first read the lessons for today I groaned, as over the years I have been subjected to rather exclusive interpretations of this passage.

It IS tempting to interpret this passage exclusively. After all, doesn't it say clearly, “for all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light ... those who do what is true come to the light.”

But this is too easy.

Exclusive interpretations of Scripture in today's world fail to consider the historical reality of the early church.

The historical reality is that only a minority of the Jewish people believed Jesus was the Son of God. Those holding such a belief were subject to discipline by synagogue authorities. Early followers of Jesus either forcefully confessed their faith through strong language like the language we just heard in today's Gospel, or retreated back into the synagogue as secret followers of Christ.

Scholarly consensus is that John's Gospel in the context of these co-existing realities fueled strong convictions and equally strong, or exclusive, language expressing those convictions.

Dualistic interpretation of John's gospel remains present in some current Christian traditions: Either see the Light and you are saved, or fail to see it and you are condemned. Even though I may inwardly disagree with this black and white interpretation, in the past I've allowed it to prevail without digging deeper to understand where the strong dualistic language fits in with John's overarching message.

Perhaps I'm called to be an apologist for John 3:16 and 3:17.

But what is an apologist?

The definition of an apologist is "a person who offers an argument in defense of something controversial." True to that definition, I'm going to argue that we consider something controversial. I suggest that we – hold your breath - consider a different approach to understanding John 3:16 & 17. I suggest that, perhaps counter to traditional understanding, we pursue an understanding that considers these passages with their often-present dualistic language, in light of John's gospel as a whole.

So if I'm to be an apologist, I can't afford the luxury of just groaning and disagreeing inwardly. No, I have to bring "an inquiring and discerning heart" as one of my favorite baptismal prayers offers. I must have "the courage to will and to persevere," and a spirit that deeply desires to "know and to love" God.

As Episcopalians, we have a wealth of resources to help us dig deeper to be effective apologists. In the Episcopalian/Anglican

understanding, it is the foundational concept of Incarnation (meaning, God taking on human flesh – not even as a fully grown human – but as a baby) upon which we build our apologetic efforts.

The Collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas is the most succinct expression of our Episcopalian/Anglican understanding of the Incarnation: “O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity ...”.

Let’s see how scripture informs the KEY phrases of that Collect– “wonderfully created,” “more wonderfully restored,” and “share the divine life.” John’s Gospel echoes Genesis: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God Word became flesh and lived among us.” This is the incarnation. This is how God “wonderfully restores” humanity, and demonstrates how much God so loved, and still loves. So much so “that God gave his only Son” to take on flesh to be, to walk, to live, to teach, to break bread, and to die among us. In return, as our Collect reminds us, we “share the divine life” of Jesus.

John emphasizes that yes, through Jesus the Word really has become flesh. Through Jesus, the Word really is living among us. Through Jesus we not only encounter the Divine, *we* “share the divine life” of Jesus through his Incarnation.

With Jesus, encountering the Divine is possible anytime, anywhere.

By sharing in Jesus' "divine life," we carry a piece of the Divine within us, and we encounter the Divine within every person we meet.

Through these sacred encounters with the "divine life" we catch a glimpse of eternal life ... in that very moment, a moment some refer to as "the holy now."

These "holy nows" appear throughout John's gospel – with the Pharisee Nicodemus, the woman of Samaria, John the Baptist, feeding the 5000, in healing after healing, and finally with Jesus washing the disciple's feet. Over and over we see a dawning of who Jesus is through the "holy nows" his love sets in motion.

This is the fuller understanding of John 3:16-17. "For God so loved the world, God gave God's only son, so that everyone who believed in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Perhaps - eternal life isn't something we have to wait for; it can be experienced now. "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."

Jesus comes not to condemn worthless sinners, he comes to restore the "wonderfully made" world to its "original goodness" just waiting to be re-discovered.

Lent is an opportunity for each of us to make that discovery to check in and see if we've been limiting the places God's love, as opposed solely to Jesus' death, can reach. It's about making space to more deeply understand God's love; a love that allows for eternal life in the "holy now" experienced within ourselves and

with each and every person we meet. We can see the face of Christ in all people, whether or not they look or act like us. All we have to do is look.

I won't apologize for this message;

I will celebrate and shout it from the rooftops.

But we can't get to the rooftop if we don't claim this message, internalize it, and live it – and I mean really live it! And we betray the message if we walk away and allow the Holy Scriptures to be defined through one particular lens. Our baptism into Christ's Body calls us to the exact opposite. It calls us to go directly into those challenging, troublesome, confusing parts of Scripture or theology, with "inquiring and discerning hearts."

Being an apologist isn't easy work, but it's worthy work and we need each other's company up on the roof tops and down on the streets -

in the grocery store, at school, at our workplaces, gathered around tables, "in shops or at tea."

Humanity cannot hear too often about a God whose love in the form of a babe permits all of us to share the divine life with Him and with each other. And in that sharing we need not wait for eternal life.

Our own "holy now" can happen right here, and right now.