

“Who Gets In?”

Lent 4B-18

Ephesians 2: 1-10

John 3: 14-21

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“Who Gets In?”

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

You may not have the verse memorized word for word, but it’s familiar to many. If not the words, then perhaps the name, chapter, and verse numbers—John 3:16. Every now and then you’ll spot it on a bumper sticker or a billboard or, a couple decades ago in particular, a sign held up at a sports game.

Its popularity is widespread in part because this single verse seems... it seems to offer a clear, concise, easy-to-understand summary of the whole darn Gospel.

Want to know the point of Christianity? John 3:16.

Want to know why I go to church? John 3:16.

Want to know what I believe? John 3:16.

Want to know what you should believe, and why you should believe it? John 3:16.

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

Most of us have been taught to interpret it something like this: if you believe in Jesus Christ, then you’ll live eternally (meaning, you’ll get in to heaven when you die). But if you don’t believe in Christ... well, then, you won’t get into heaven. In fact, as John tells it, if you don’t believe... you’re condemned.

He uses tough language. Tough language I long had trouble with. Tough language that, too this day, I think does more damage than good when it comes to sharing the point of our faith in the form of this passage.

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You see, growing up in the church, I was always taught that our faith in Christ *is* what gets us into heaven when we die. I mean... sure, we have faith in Jesus for other reasons, but as John 3:16 seems to say, it’s our faith in Christ that will enable us to live *eternally*, right?

It’s why I can remember being thankful, as a child, that I was Christian. That I believed in Jesus. And that when a loved one dies... or when I one day die... we’ll get into heaven.

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

I accepted this as truth for quite a while, never having reason to question it. But as years passed and my world began to expand, so, too, did my questions.

I began wondering about those who died but never had the chance of coming to faith in Christ in this lifetime. Would the God of love I saw in Jesus Christ really condemn them? So I began asking some questions. “What about an African girl who dies when she’s three and never

believed in Jesus? Does she get in?” “What about the man from India who was an incredibly faithful Hindu, but never in his lifetime came across a Christian or learned of Christ. Does he get into heaven?”

Most of the time, I got honest answers, “You know, Robbie, I don’t know.”

But occasionally, I’d read something at my church, or someone would try to make it clear, “Like it or not, there are two options when we die: believe in Christ and go to heaven; or don’t believe in Christ and go to hell.”

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

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To this day, I suspect most Christians believe this—that you *have* to confess faith in Christ to get into heaven. You may believe that. And if you do, I’m not saying you’re wrong. It’s something many Reformed theologians have taught.

But for me, the more I wrestled with all the questions, the more the pieces just didn’t seem to fit.

It occurred to me that I was Christian largely because I was born into a Christian family. If I’d been born into a Muslim family, I’d have probably grown up to be a Muslim, right? Same thing for Jewish, Hindu, and atheist families. We all grow up taking part in the histories and faith stories we’re told. So would God really condemn those brought up in other faith stories to hell... because of the faith of the family into which they were born?

My doubts grew as my questions turned into a full-fledged wrestling match.

But it was in my senior year of college that my struggle with John 3:16 crystallized. That was the year I spent counseling abused kids. Beautiful, wonderful, but troubled and broken kids who had difficult, painful relationships with their parents. Relationships that made it hard for them to trust others. Relationships that had taught them the hard way *not* to believe in something like unconditional love.

While I loved those kids, I left that job knowing that some of them were gonna struggle to live in loving relationships for the rest of their lives. And I knew that, because of what happened to them as children—something horrible that they had no control over—many of them would find it next to impossible to ever learn to trust in the love God has for them.

But would God hold that against them for eternity? Would God condemn these abused kids if they grow up to be adults who might know of Christ, but find it too much to believe in a God of grace and love based on the childhoods they’d experienced?

I decided I couldn’t believe in that kind of God anymore. If the Christian faith declares that only those who profess faith in Christ get into heaven when they die and all others spend eternity separated from God’s love, then maybe I wasn’t a Christian after all. For if the grace of God is big enough to include me, then it sure as heck has to be big enough to include those kids—whether they ever come to believe in Jesus or not.

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

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I didn't realize it at the time, but I now see my wrestling with this question of who gets in as one of the driving forces behind my enrollment in seminary the following year. In fact, I remember sitting in a worship class at the beginning of my first semester at seminary, when the professor asked, "Tell me, what's the primary question you're asking yourself right as you begin this seminary journey." Almost without thinking, my hand shot up.

"Who gets in?" I blurted out.

"Huh? What do you mean, 'Who gets in?'"

"Who gets into heaven? Only those who believe in Christ, or is God's grace bigger than that?" I was so hopeful I'd get an answer—a Reformed answer that'd let me know how far I'd strayed from proper Reformed theology. Except the professor didn't answer me.

"Hmmm. Interesting question," he said, moving on.

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It wasn't until later that year amid a class on the New Testament that I finally began to uncover some of the beauty and danger that resides within John's gospel... and, in particular, what happens when we take a single verse out of a chapter and treat it as if we can possibly understand what John really means.

You see, John uses images—symbols—to tell his gospel story. But more than this, John uses dualistic or opposing symbols to paint his gospel with bold, contrasting colors. It's why over and over John contrasts images like life and death, light and darkness, flesh and spirit, truth and evil.

But this also means these words—these symbols—they mean more than we typically assume they mean. For example, the word "life" in John's gospel doesn't merely mean being alive ... just as the word "death" doesn't simply mean being dead. In fact, for John, you could be dead, and still alive. Just as you could be alive, but not living real life.

It's weird, I know... but it goes something like this: if you're alive, but you're living without the love and hope and grace of Jesus Christ, then you're not really living. In this instance, you're alive, but you're actually "dead" to the real life God intends for you.

For what God intends for us all—you and me and those we don't even know—isn't just for us to be alive in this world, but to be fully alive—to live what John calls "eternal life" in John 3:16.

And while John says we get there by "believing" in Christ, scholars note that the word "believe" doesn't refer primarily to having the right theological beliefs or mental understandings of who he is. Rather, the Greek word "believe" is much more akin to the English word "belove." So for John, to believe in Jesus is to love him. It's to give him your allegiance... your faithfulness. To believe in Jesus is to give him your heart.¹

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life here and now."

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Well... as I began to get my mind around these golden interpretive nuggets, I realized my assumptions about John had all been wrong. I realized I'd assumed John was writing about who gets into heaven, when it turns out, at least here in John 3:16, John's not talking about the afterlife at all but about the quality of our living here and now. He's sharing how the choices we

¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*

make—the way we either choose to live out our love of Jesus Christ or not—these choices lead us into or away from the life God intends for us in this lifetime.

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Are you with me?

Now... I share all of this in part because that has been important to my own personal faith journey. But I also share it because I think this is a crucial piece of the faith puzzle that Christians so often get wrong. And it has huge implications—HUGE implications—for the church of today and tomorrow. So if I lost you along the way, I ask that you listen to this.

The question I'd spent all those years wrestling with... it was the wrong question. The gospels really aren't the least bit interested in who gets in, but how are we living? John isn't asking us to believe the right things... he's asking to choose the right things so that our life will reflect our faith.

Which means the Church's call is not—it is NOT—to make sure people believe the exact right things so that they go to heaven when they die. Not at all. Rather, I believe the questions before the church are questions like:

How can we help each other live our faith amid our daily walks?

How can we equip each other to spread the love and grace and peace of Jesus Christ to those who have yet to uncover it?

How can we, as a community, live into what John calls “eternal life” in the here and the now?

For the dualistic John, we can only do one or the other—follow Jesus along the way to eternal life, or fail to follow Jesus and find ourselves along the way to death. We can choose to believe in Jesus... actually trusting in him... obeying his word and following his way. Or we can choose not to believe... not to trust in his way, and instead choose to build up fortunes for ourselves and ignore our neighbors' needs and pretend that it's okay for the church of Jesus Christ to take a pass on the pains of this world. Let those be someone else's problems.

There's no denying it. For John, every moment of every day is a chance for us to live or a chance to die.

Every day offers chances to choose light or darkness.

Every moment brings chances to choose the eternal, or the all-too-finite.

Every encounter is a chance to choose compassion or indifference.

And lest we think can simply not choose... as if we can bypass something because it just seems too hard... too costly... too controversial... well, the gospel makes clear that's making a choice, just the same.

So as we continue traversing this Lenten journey together friends, I invite you to spend these next three weeks taking note of the choices you make.

When given the chance to be generous or stingy, what will you choose?

When given the chance to cast judgment or give grace, what will you choose?

When given the chance to extend compassion or simply walk on by, what will you choose?

When given the chance to risk yourself on behalf of another... when given the chance to speak truth to power even at your own personal cost... when given the chance to fight for something bigger than you for the common, what will you choose? Will you choose life or will you choose death? Will you choose the way of the eternal, or the way of this world?

John chapter 3 makes clear that we have choices to make—and the stakes could not be higher.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world in order to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Amen.