

John 3: 16-21

Choosing God

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Last spring I completed my dissertation on preaching with themes. Part of the project was to review all the themes we have used over the last five years and propose a three-year set of themes for people who want to use worship themes. I remember going to see my advisor after she had read the first draft of my dissertation. She said she liked the preaching themes but she did not agree with the order of them. “Why would you preach about God in February halfway through the program year?” she challenged me. “I believe that God should be a topic for September; that way you start the year in the fall laying the foundation for all that is to follow.” I think I surprised her because ordinarily I tried to abide by all her suggestions. But this time I said that I believed it would be a big mistake to begin the program year talking about God. People are new to church in the fall, or they are just coming back from vacation. We all need time to become acclimated before we take up a topic like this. You need to work up to a theme like “God”. While we all feel we should know about God, I think it is one of the hardest topics all year. God is a confusing topic.

We all have a working definition of God but no one really feels like an expert when it comes to GOD. Is God a king on a throne or a shepherd with a flock? Is God impervious to us or attentive? Was God a pre-Enlightenment fantasy or does God really hear our prayers now? For such an enigma, God can provoke some pretty strong feelings. Disciples were crucified, martyrs burned at the stake out of devotion to God. In the Middle Ages people marched thousands of miles and fought for many years to re-take the ancient city of Jerusalem believing God would be pleased. Today, people worry that God has turned a blind eye to their suffering, or they give up on faith entirely claiming God has not answered their prayers. Yet, when you travel on an airplane and the skies are turbulent even the most urbane and skeptical travelers suddenly reach for their rosaries or close their eyes to pray to God with all the fervency they can muster.

Behind all the stories in our Bible lies the main question at the heart of Holy Scripture: Who is God and how can we know God? Few verses in scripture offer a better lens for understanding God than the one we read in the third chapter of John's gospel. It may help us see God more clearly through the fog, and then be more ready to seek to build a deeper relationship with God. God so loved the world.... What does this verse mean for us?

In the first place, God is Love. God created people in order to have a relationship with us. God had children for the same reason most of us do. We want to watch them grow. We want to see the world with wonder through their eyes. We want to nurture life- the life of someone else. God created Adam and Eve for the same reasons. While they remained in the Garden of Eden I imagine that things worked really well for a long time. God knew where they were. It was not hard to see them. There were opportunities to chat, and catch up. Like any parent of young children, God probably enjoyed that time of life. But Adam and Eve out grew the garden and they needed to go out on their own. We all know the story. Like teenagers, they tested their limits and ate of the forbidden fruit and God knew it was time to let them go. It was a hard parting and God raged and then sewed them new clothes and hoped for the best.

The Bible starts there because the premise behind the stories that follow is that there is a search in progress. Human beings are free but God is waiting and hoping that we won't forget where we came from. But the results have been uneven. The stories of the Hebrew Bible tell of times of great closeness and times of estrangement. God talked to Moses but most of the other people worshipped a calf when Moses was not around. God led the people to a new land but the people grew easily distracted and made gods of other things. Prophets realized that God felt like a husband with an unfaithful wife. God tried interventions of all kinds. But in the end God decided that something much more radical is needed. So God took on human form and came to earth as Jesus of Nazareth.

I have four grandchildren. Ruth is the oldest at 6. Over the years we have developed a relationship. So when I call her she can talk about My Little Pony, or what happened at kindergarten. But when I want to talk to Jed who is 18 months they tell me he just smiles at the phone and looks confused. Mira is 10 months and

Delilah is 2 months. They have no clue about who I am. If I want these guys to know me I will have to make a visit and travel to them.

That was the problem for God, too. God made connections with the old souls. God reached out to prophets and inspired them, but people seemed so uncertain about where and when they could find God that something more was needed. A trip was necessary. So God came in the form of a human being a baby at first, but one who grew into a man who could show the people that God was real. Sending your child away as an infant is risky business. We have only a few examples of this today, and they all demonstrate a parent's heroic and unselfish love. Usually people send their children away only in an emergency. In World War II when they sensed the true danger, Jewish families in Nazi Germany had to secret their children into safe homes in other parts of Europe or even further away than that. They took this enormous risk because they thought it was worth it. English families in London during the blitz sent their children away to perfect strangers in the countryside, in an enormous act of trust and great love. Today families in Later America in countries like Honduras where drug traders make villages unsafe have sent small children over the border into Texas and Arizona because they love them.

We often think that the way to know God is to concentrate on God's invincibility, but it is God's vulnerability that shows God's greatness best. God loved us so much that when God had tried everything then God sent his Son to lie in a manger.

In the second place, God wants us to flourish. Jesus came to show us how to flourish and thrive. He came into the Roman Empire but was not oppressed. He lived as a free man. When he prayed he called God Father and showed us that we don't have to fear God. When he reached out to touch lepers and eat with prostitutes he showed us that we don't have to fear one another. We are all human beings and children of the same God. When he died on a cross and was raised again he showed us that we don't have to fear death. His saving grace for us came through his life as much as his death.

The Bible says God sent Jesus to save us. Some folks say Jesus saved us from sin, but I think Jesus came to save us from blindness too. He came to save us from self-involvement and the kind of narcissism that will eat you alive. He came to save us from being so guarded that we fail to really live. He came to save us from the idea

that this is all there is – the things in life you can see. He came to save us from the shallowness of self-involvement, and turned us to think about our neighbors for their sakes and for ours. Hunkering down and playing it safe does not make you flourish. Jesus came to save us from ourselves.

Today we celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the vote to become ONA. I remember that day and the way the church was packed. You could feel the tension. Not everybody wanted this to go through. Some folks were scared. Some did not even think we should talk about anything sexual in church. Teens who taught Sunday school came to gather in the back of the church. They were loud and cheered when the debate favored ONA. The moderator called for order several times as the debate progressed. In the end we voted and the vast majority wanted to be open to everyone in word and deed.

A lot of people worried that we'd be overrun by gays and lesbians. But the people who were most encouraged by this vote initially, were our own members who had sons and daughters who were gay. The vote told them they could bring their children to church. Young families who were tired of other churches where authorities were inflexible started to arrive; they were seeking a church where people were striving not to be so bigoted. The arc of history turned again toward justice on this issue. We learned that God wanted us to flourish. We also learned that you flourish when you do the right thing.

Finally, the Bible says we choose everyday whether to be open to God. John says that Jesus came offering light but the world preferred darkness. They had a choice but did not choose wisely. But every one of us has the same choice to make. You choose each day whether to see the light of God, or not.

Jesus came to show us the light but many people prefer the dark. They prefer to be angry at God, or unresponsive. They prefer to ignore God until they need something and then wonder why they cannot pray. They prefer to get so busy there was no time for God. They prefer being cynical. Even though it does not make you happy, they prefer it.

In his book on God, Rob Bell tells of a woman he met in Boston on a speaking tour. She told him a story which he recounts in his book. "She had been in the hospital for ongoing cancer treatment, thinking she was not going to make it. She remembers being lower than she had ever been before, filled with despair and wondering if she was going to die soon, when the night shift nurse came in, and began to care for her with a

degree of loving kindness she needed but which was rare even in good hospitals. Throughout the night the nurse returned repeatedly checking on her and calming her and reassuring her and speaking to her in a way that lifted her entire being and gave her hope. In the morning she woke up feeling like a different person. Then she asked the morning nurse for the name of the woman who had been caring for her, and provided a detailed description. The nurse said no one who met that description worked on this floor of the hospital, not to mention the night before.” {Bell, Rob. *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*. New York: Harper One, 2013, p. 76-77}

Now some people hear stories like this and roll their eyes. Others seek a logical explanation. Others call it a coincidence. Why? Because no one can give you faith; it is a decision you have to make for yourself. No one can make you drink the waters of faith. All anyone can do is lead you to those streams of living water. You are the one who has to decide whether to drink or not. That decision is always squarely in your hands.

