

**SENT**  
**HOLY TRINITY SUNDAY – BLC – B.HULL SOMERS**

***Isaiah 6:1-8, Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17***

John 3:16 is the probably the most quoted Scripture in the Bible. I would argue it is also the most misunderstood.

In our contemporary Christian milieu it has come to, basically, mean: turn or burn. Or, become a Christian or go to hell.

A popular evangelism technique given this interpretation of Scripture is to ask, “If you died tonight, would you go to heaven or hell?”

How terrifying. How confusing. How completely ridiculous.

Ridiculous because, this is NOT what John 3:16 or any of the Gospels or anything in the entire biblical canon is communicating. It is not. Being a person of faith is not about having fire insurance and not going to hell. Period.

What John 3:16 and all the Gospels and the entire biblical canon is saying is that faith in God is not actually about a future after we die; it is about right now. The verb used in the original Greek is best translated “is having” rather than “will have.” It denotes that this eternal life from our trust in God is not something that will start when we breathe our last and only if we have been very, very good. Eternal life starts now and it is available to us in God’s grace, free of charge and in unlimited supply.

On a beautiful Pacific Northwest day such as today that is not difficult to imagine. The sun shining on the cedars, the mountains standing stark white against the blue backdrop of sky,

the Salish Sea glistening in the sunshine. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, “earth is crammed with heaven.”

Don’t get me wrong, the afterlife heaven will be neat. I am looking forward to seeing one very recent resident of that place, but heaven is here, now.

That is not to say that everything is well and without trouble. It is not.

Our babies are getting gunned down in their schools. There are islands of plastic floating in the oceans – killing wildlife. Pacific Northwest shellfish have opioids in them because of contamination in our waterways. People are getting killed, children separated from parents and folk are going to war over made up human lines called borders that we have drawn on this earth that God made. Not to mention our own deeply personal griefs – our own depression, loss, and disappointment.

How on earth could heaven be now?

The rest of John 3:16 gives us a clue – it says ‘believe in Jesus’ ...but it is also better translated as “trust.” To believe in something really does not require much of us. We can believe in something – a fact, doctrine or idea – with no risk to ourselves. We only take action and risks when we trust. We can believe that the glass bottom look out at the Empire State Building will hold us, but we only walk out onto it when we trust it will and test it out. And, believe me, you won’t stay on it long because it is terrifying. Only through trust can we turn belief into action.

Nicodemus – to whom John 3:16 was originally spoken – learned this.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee – a well-respected leader and teacher. When he went to Jesus in our Gospel text he did so in secret, in the dead of night. He was not willing to risk his

reputation on the questionable prophet from Nazareth. When he found Jesus that night he was full of questions. Jesus talked about being born from above – a new birth that would eradicate one’s original birthright and give them the birthright of a child of God – it was radical stuff. In the first century you could not change your birth status. It did not matter how smart or successful you were, you were always the status you were born with. What Jesus proposed – of everyone having the birthright of children of God – it was earth shaking. Scandalous. Dangerous. Enough to get him killed.

Nicodemus sought Jesus out and only met with him in the dead of night to protect his own reputation but his experience with Jesus changed him. We know because of his actions of trust. We know because after Jesus died, Nicodemus was the one to bring his lifeless body down from the cross. A very public act joining him with the rogue prophet. Nicodemus learned to trust God.

Isaiah had a similar experience in the presence of the Most High. In our Old Testament passage we see him in the presence of fantastical creatures – the Seraphim, angels of the Most High – and Godself. Isaiah entered and was very aware of his own inadequacy. “Woe is me”, he proclaimed, “I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips.” But then he watched as God and the angels equipped and empowered him – bringing the burning coal of God’s truth to his lips and then asking him, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?”

Being in the presence of God shook Isaiah and changed him. He stopped being the “woe is me” person and became the “here am I, send me” person. Just as Nicodemus went from being the “visiting the prophet under the cover of night” person into the “boldly caring for the

body of his publicly executed teacher” person. Both were inspired by their experiences with God and learned to trust.

These are examples of heaven coming to earth. Eternal life being lived out in real time.

It is not supernatural power; it is showing up. It not having all the gifts we need; it is trusting God. It is not having a perfect life, but a grace filled one.

This is easy to say and difficult to do.

One of my favorite poets, Brian Andreas wrote, “Anyone can slay a dragon, she told me, but try waking up every morning and loving the world all over again. That’s what takes a real hero.”

This living into eternal life now stuff requires spending time in the presence of God. Through prayer, meditation, running, hiking, drinking coffee on your front porch, coming to church, serving others, laughing with your children – and in so many other and varied ways. It requires stepping out in trust on the promises of God. That forgiveness is more powerful than revenge; that peace is more important than winning, and that love always wins.

When we allow the presence of God to touch our lives and trust in God’s truth, we are changed. We become people born from above and nothing will stop us from loving the world all over again.

How are we populating heaven right now? What has God called you to do that you need to stand boldly up and declare, “Here am I; send me.”?

How will you bring heaven this week?

Many of you brought heaven to me this last month after the death of my father. Truly. Simple things. Flowers. Notes. Food. You brought heaven.

It is not rocket science or feeding the 5,000. It is just small things done in great love. You can bring heaven by listening for a moment or two to your neighbors, by remembering someone's name, by seeing a person in need and offering your assistance, by standing up for justice, by voting, by asking questions, by keeping your mouth shut, by forgiving when it is hard, by declaring with your life, heaven is now.

Heaven does not start when we die. It starts when we live into our birthright of children of God, transformed by our experience of God's grace and love, sent to bring that same Good News with every breath. Amen.

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