

Growing up, I was familiar with the reference to John 3:16 long before I knew what John 3:16 actually said.

It was on posterboard all over nationally televised sporting events. Behind home plate at baseball games and in the raucous crowds of WWE wrestling matches.

I always kind of assumed it was a brilliant biblical sports pun, and was a bit underwhelmed when I discovered that it was really just the most popular form of lazy evangelism. No context necessary apparently.

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.

For some of you the overuse or abuse of this text may cause it to leave a bad taste in your mouth.

Which is a tragic thing to have done to a beautiful verse about God's love for the world.

When the verse is proclaimed in bold sharpie without context in a public setting, the implication can be that Christianity can be boiled down to a simple equation, and that you're dense if you don't see how this one verse makes Christianity the only obvious solution to all of your spiritual questions."

There may be other obstacles to appreciating today's text.

"So that everyone who believes in him?" Does our faith boil down to giving mental assent to a propositional statement?

And how can we talk about saving the world in one sentence and then talk about the condemnation of unbelievers in the next sentence!

What about this insistence of dividing people into those who love light and those who love dark? Aren't people more complicated than that?

And what is with Jesus referencing this obscure Old Testament text where God sends a bunch of poisonous serpents to kill unfaithful Israelites only to save them by making them look at a bronze serpent raised in the air?

I think it is good to know what we are getting into when we read the Gospel of John.

Matthew, Luke and especially Mark read like a straight-forward narrative. When we open the Gospel of John we are entering a very different space. It is more philosophical, it contains within it deep symbolism and metaphor. Which is not to say that it does not contain truths meant to be taken literally, it just requires more work to figure out which parts those are!

The Gospel of John is by far the latest Gospel written, decades after Matthew, Mark and Luke, likely 50-60 years after Jesus' earthly ministry. If three other prominent gospels already existed in circulation, it is worth asking what compelled its author to write another one, with so much unique material.

Who was he writing to? What was that community going through? And how does it help *us* read this text today?

While there is obviously much speculation involved, many scholars believe the Johaniene community may have been a Christian community only recently expelled from a local synagogue.

It is easy to forget that especially Jewish converts to Christianity continued to worship alongside their Jewish brethren for decades after Jesus' death and

resurrection. After all, they did share most of their cultural and theological identity in common.

In some ways, there were Jews that believed Jesus was the Messiah and Jews that didn't, and some of those groups continued to worship together despite their differences for a long time.

Over time those differences became too much to navigate, and this Johanian group of believers was forced (or felt forced) from the synagogue. This doesn't mean all Christians left at once. There would have likely been less outspoken Christians or perhaps those who simply felt that what they stood to lose was not worth a complete break from their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Those who did choose to leave would have likely been a group dealing with the trauma and grief of a schism that created a vacuum in their theological and cultural identity. Who were they now?

The Gospel of John perhaps is written to encourage and ground these believers in their identity in Christ.

So when we read:

“Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God,” we must remember that a text written to motivate and encourage a disillusioned minority group of Christians reads a lot differently than if a powerful Christian majority uses it.

If the tone feels abrasive and polemical, perhaps the tone wasn't meant for a comfortable privileged Western context, at home in its Christian identity.

However, tone aside, there is no doubt that according to the Gospel of John, the coming of Jesus into our world and into our lives results in a crisis that demands a decision. Neutrality is not a possibility.

Our text today starts right after the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, a teacher of the law that came to Jesus under the cover of night. There is the sense in that story that Nicodemus knew who Jesus was and did not want to commit. Jesus chidingly says to him:

Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

Perhaps the Nicodemus story is a pointed nod to the Christians who stayed in the synagogue and kept silent instead of leaving with the Johnian community.

There is no staying silent anymore.

“just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up”

Lifted up how? The phrase is full of symbolism and word play.

Lifted up as in the horror of being raised up on a cross? Lifted up as in defeating death to rise after three days? Lifted up as in ascending into heaven and glorified?

The challenge posed by the advent of Jesus is that we are called to a stance about who we are, what we stand for, and what exactly we believe.

Jesus demands a stance, which requires active decision-making. As one commentator puts it, to follow Jesus requires the courage to swim upstream against the strong currents that carry society’s brutal and sinful ideologies.

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.

John uses the phrase “eternal life” in much the same way the other Gospels talk about the Kingdom of God, or that Paul talks about being “in Christ.” Of primary interest is not just an unending human existence but life lived in the presence of God.

For God so loved the world that he gave us Jesus, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have a life lived in the presence of God.

I mentioned earlier that we sometimes hear the phrase “believing in” to mean “giving mental assent to a propositional statement”

Lance Pape writes that:

To “believe that” Jesus died and was raised to save us is easy to understand in the sense that it requires almost nothing of us. But such simplicity does not honor the larger story John is telling. This is a story about Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus that left an intelligent and accomplished man scratching his head in bewilderment as he went back out into the darkness. This is a story about how any one of us might reject the light offered to us because of the way it exposes what is dark in us. To “believe” this Good News in a way that brings salvation requires more than “believing that;” it requires “trusting in.” To “trust in” Jesus is not simply to believe something about what happened long ago, but also to let our own lives be transformed by the Jesus we encounter in this story.

For God so loved the world that he gave us Jesus, so that everyone who trusted in him and was transformed by him may not perish but have a life lived in the presence of God.

What is John asking of us? What is our part to play so that we may see the Son of Man lifted up, so that we may be saved through him, so that we may

do what is true and come to the light? So that we may experience a life lived
in the presence of God?

Pape offers several suggestions:

“Placing our trust in this Jesus means withholding our ultimate loyalty and
trust from other things that ask us to pledge our allegiance.”

Political party, material possession, denominational affiliation.

Is your ultimate loyalty first and foremost, the way of Christ, and is that
apparent to the world around you.

Second, “we must repent of the ways our self-satisfied religiosity becomes a
barrier to understanding the new things Jesus offers and asks of us. The
“lifting up” of Jesus is a stumbling block for those obsessed with decorum
and conformity to tradition.”

We must not only ask what Jesus asks for us to hold onto, but also what we
are called to let go of.

Consider especially the elements of our faith that have conveniently kept us
comfortable and in control.

Finally, “placing our trust in this Jesus means confronting the inconvenient
truth that God’s purposes for those God loves are not synonymous with our
own common-sense values of happiness, health, and safety. The trail of faith
that Jesus blazed reveals that, while there is nothing in this world worth
killing for, there are things worth dying for. The “lifting up” of Jesus
reminds us that the true life God has promised us is not the life that we can
secure for ourselves through self-interest and caution.”

Where are you being called to take risks?

Where does Christ’s call push up against your common-sense impulse for
self-preservation?

The context of John's original readers of early Christians is very different from our own, but the passionate insistence that Christ be lifted up and that our lives unapologetically reflect Christ in every way, rings as true for us today as it did 2000 years ago.

Carry John 3:16 with you. Not on posterboard, but on your hearts.