

John 3:1-17

Lent 2

March 5, 2023

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Believe... born again...eternal life

These words all appear in the Gospel passage for today but what do they mean?

Believe... .. born again...eternal life

These words have already been translated many times over before landing on our ears today: from Aramiac or Greek to Latin or English to different English versions...on and on, and they each have been researched and written about extensively. Eric is leading a really wonderful Bible study that delves into some of these same words. I'm really enjoying it. Please come join us after church. But I also think there are private translations that we make in our own lives.

Believe

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What were the intentions and intuitions of the writer of the Gospel of John finalized some seventy years after the death of Jesus? And what might Jesus actually have said? Aramic was a verbal language only. Nothing was written down. Meaning was conveyed by subtle variations in sound: sounds which no one living has had the privilege of hearing. Abba which we translate as father was actually closer to Abwoon, a conjunction which sonically connects father and womb. Our abwoon who lives in heaven...Our Birther.

I mention this because I STILL think it is important to try to imagine how even our most beloved words and familiar statements of faith may sound to someone else: a stranger to the faith perhaps or even our neighbor in the pew. If our goal is to be truly evangelical, and to build beloved community, it is important to listen and to share, to question and to grow, otherwise we are truly content just speaking to ourselves.

Over the last 25 or years or so of coming to church, my own understanding of John 3 has changed. What initially felt off-putting and exclusive to me (only if you Believe in me will you have eternal life) has evolved to an inclusive understanding. What was once an obstacle to faith became an open pathway. Now in John 3, I hear not a separation of believers and non believers and heaven and hell but an account of the painfulness and the hope that describes the reality I am living in right now. I hear that God, the birther of the universe cares about the human family because God became a part of that family. I hear that Jesus isn't just God's son but also God's self. And I remember that Jesus emptied himself not so we would believe everything that was later written about him but so that we could in essence walk right through him, right through the achingly beautiful space he left behind, right through the wound in his side and find the arms of our father.

So I wonder: Are there words or Christian concepts that have been stumbling blocks for you ?

Believe

Born Again

Eternal life

For my husband the phrase *Born Again* was the problem. He grew up with fundamentalist relatives who had a very particular understanding of this phrase. Being born again entailed a very specific demonstration of faith in church. In fact Dave's relatives felt so certain of their understanding of this requirement that they refused to attend their daughter's wedding because her husband hadn't satisfied this requirement. There was pain all around.

So what might it mean to be born again in a more inclusive way? *To be free of addiction* someone said yesterday. *Finally really seeing the ocean* a friend said. *I couldn't see color when I was so depressed.* Julian of Norwich wrote: God is the womb in which we are ever becoming and out of which we will never come.

Our suffering increases when we refuse to expand our definitions of who God is, when we insist that a door has to be shut for us to be safe inside and to keep others out...when in truth, God is ever opening it. 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.*

How might our own words, our own lives become eucharistic... shaped to feed hungers that people may not even know they have? How might people experience Jesus in this church before knowing exactly what the word means?

Which brings me to *eternal life*.

So what does eternal life mean to you? In my experience people often have touched the hem of the eternal around the time of a death but they are often embarrassed to speak of it. In our rational universe it seems superstitious. And so they brush it aside. The butterfly that landed on your hand after your sister died. The book long lost suddenly refound next to your deceased husband's toothbrush.

Just as I think there are words and theological concepts that can be closed doors for us at certain times, I believe there are also experiences that open doors that we are afraid to walk through.

I wondered today if it might be possible for us to share some of these moments.

(Several parishioners shared moving stories of their experiences here.)

The first funeral I did alone here was for James Post. He was an avid ham radio operator and at the end of his service, at his children's request, I signed off with his call letters. This last thursday I was with his two children again as we laid his wife Joan's ashes next to him at Center Cemetery in Portland. There was the sense that we were again tuned in to that same frequency. It was invisible but palpable.

There is a wise Jewish saying. The miracle on Mount Horeb was not that the bush burned on and was not consumed *but that Abraham noticed it*. Part of being beloved community is noticing the mysteries in our path and being willing to be vulnerable enough to share them with each other.

Signing off: 73's K1-NQJ

Amen

My work is loving the world.

Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird -
equal seekers of sweetness.

Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.

Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?

Am I no longer young and still not half-perfect? Let me

keep my mind on what matters,

which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.

The phoebe, the delphinium.

The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.

Which is mostly rejoicing, since all ingredients are here,

Which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart

and these body-clothes,

a mouth with which to give shouts of joy

to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,

telling them all, over and over, how it is

that we live forever.

"My Work is Loving the World" by Mary Oliver