

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Second Sunday of Lent
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Lectionary Year A: John 3:1-17

We hear some familiar and comforting words today; I would venture to guess that even the most biblically illiterate person knows John 3:16. Indeed, these words encapsulate the Christian faith better than anyone ever could. To give you an idea of the esteem with which they're held, the noted sixteenth-century religious reformer Martin Luther called John 3:16 "the Gospel in a nutshell."

But enough with the musings -- let us hear the actual text one more time: "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."

This is the good news. No more must we live under the death sentence of condemnation that troubled humanity since Adam and Eve fell from grace in the Garden of Eden. God's own Son lived and died so that he could bring humanity back into this precious grace, and we receive the fruit of Christ's sacrifice in the form of eternal life with him. It is the central promise of the Christian faith and thus a source of assurance and comfort for the over two billion Christians across the world.

Yet the criticisms of Christianity bear mention here, particularly the criticism that Christians are bound and compelled to their faith by what appears to be a carrot dangled in front of them. While I am not convinced that Christianity is, in essence, an incentive program, I can clearly see how it could be, especially when misunderstood. In other words, do we adhere to the promise of eternal life out of our own self interest?

An important question to consider...

If the only reason for being a Christian is the promise of eternal life, then Christianity's critics have a point. What about making use of the grace God gives us, perhaps so that others know of God's grace and experience it from us? What about doing things out of the goodness of our own heart, and not because of some promise of reward? Surely, if these concepts vanish from the Christian faith, we will be left with a pursuit of salvation that is at worst idolatrous and at best selfish!

Yet we need to remember, too, that we are creatures who seek the path of least resistance; we want answers to be quick and simple and we often don't want our religion, in particular, to place many demands upon us. As for the latter, some have concluded that, for example, belief in Jesus Christ is sufficient to relieve a person of any need to attend Sunday worship. While that may not be incorrect, I would still ask, "Is it desirable?" Is it desirable to flaunt one's extremely casual commitment to the Church?

Maybe such persons belong in the same category as those who all-too-freely share how little television they watch or how little social media they use. Those seem to be fashionable claims in some circles nowadays, too...

When you back up and read the portion of today's Gospel text that precedes the famous words of John 3:16, you will find that Jesus seems to be requiring more than faith in him. He says to Nicodemus, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5). Now, remember that Nicodemus comes to Jesus with an honest question and isn't looking to trap him in a "gotcha" situation; thus, Jesus' answer is sincere and contains

words that stir us to ponder, as well. Specifically, what do we, as 21st-century Anglican Christians, make of this idea of "being born of water and Spirit"?

Well, we're likely inclined to take the baptismal angle. We see water communicating the promise of eternal life in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, and, correspondingly, Baptism communicates the gift of the Holy Spirit. This means that, when we baptize, we fulfill the mandate of Christ himself as found in a text such as this.

Of course, we get ourselves into trouble with a certain segment of Christianity that believes one must be "born again" when one can speak for oneself, thus making God's saving grace at least partially dependent on one's voluntary decision. We reject this teaching, as our salvation depends purely on God's grace alone. I did not make a "decision for Christ" when I reached a requisite age of reason, though some of you may have (and God can work with that, too), but, in my case, God made a decision for me when he made me his own through the waters of Baptism on January 20, 1974.

This means that all who are baptized are "born again" or, as this translation puts it, "born from above." As a baptized person, you can look to Baptism as the gift in which you became an heir of God's promise; the only thing "required" of you is to say "yes" to that promise, which is something you can do every day. I'm fond of saying that we are born again every day because the very act of getting up in the morning and remembering our Baptism is a rebirth in itself.

In fact, as we are baptized in the Name of the Triune God, every time we make the sign of the cross and say, "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," we are remembering our Baptisms. Having grown up in a religious

environment where that would've been deemed "too Catholic," I would be quick to point out that making the sign of the cross has much more to do with being baptized than it does with being Catholic. Ironically, one of the staunchest defenders of making the sign of the cross was -- until the day he died -- the noted sixteenth-century religious reformer Martin Luther, who, as I recall, was often invoked during my formative years in anti-Catholic screeds!

We are called to a living faith by water and the Spirit; we look to the gifts that God gave us through his great promise and are ultimately moved to share that good news with one another. Indeed, the Christian faith is not an incentive program. We believe for reasons that are unselfish as we seek to show others how God is at work in our lives...and their lives, too. If you're here simply because you're after that big heavenly prize to be given to you the minute you die, then I'd say you're here for the wrong reason! Ideally, you're here because you want to experience the constant renewal and rebirth that comes through the baptismal promise. You're here because you not only know John 3:16, but because you want others to know that good news, as well.

The season of Lent, while it demands penitence and contrition from us, never loses sight of the good news, particularly as it calls us to see the depths of God's love for us; in fact, that's John 3:16 in a nutshell! And as we wrestle with what it means to be "born from above," we activate our own renewal and rebirth. In preparation for our Lord's resurrection, we observe Lent for the cleansing of our hearts and minds as well as for the proper positioning of ourselves to be without self-interest or vain pursuits -- indeed, these are not proper motivations for adherence to the Christian faith. Salvation is for the world, not just for me.

As for this gathering and for countless others across the world, the Church is the place where the promise of Baptism lives. We are united through this gift that is both common and extraordinary. Let us be drawn together and find the assurance of a baptismally-rooted faith, knowing that Christ's gift of eternal life comes from his own death and resurrection, experienced in the dying and rising we experience every day as we remember our Baptism. The sin and death that accumulates on us is drowned in that very remembrance. Surely, we are born again every day!

And thus we believe and live unto eternal life...

Amen.