

For God so loved the cosmos John 3:1-17
Sermon by Sharon Norton

Back when Steve and I lived in southern Germany we took several trips to Switzerland and followed the trail of the first anabaptist who needed to meet secretly,

Outside in caves and forests and up in the mountains,

Because they were being persecuted by the powers that be for being too radical.

One weekend, I actually took our youth group to camp out in The Cave of the Anabaptist in the foothills of the Alps. It's a large, dark and dank space with a little stream trickling over the top and down the hill and there's a tiny little plaque on the ceiling of The Cave that commemorates it as a secret meeting place of the early Anabaptist in the 16th century.

Another time in Switzerland, in an area called the Emmental, we walked around in the snow covered forest surrounded by giant pine trees where Anabaptists were known to meet. Here they could even sing their songs of praise and lament because the snow and the Pines would absorb the sound and would not rat them out to the authorities.

It's no wonder that one of the favorite verses of these early anabaptists was Psalm 24:1 "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants too."

While I talk this morning I invite you to look out the windows from time to time and really this sermon should be preached outside because I think it will actually help you get the point.

Since the days of the Reformation and the Radical Reformation, from which the Mennonites come, there has been a heavy emphasis on **the word**. Both the Bible as the word of God and the words we use to proclaim the Bible and the good news of Jesus. The sermon became the center of Protestant worship, rather than the taking of communion, which remains the center of worship in Catholic and Orthodox churches

When the great Billy Graham and other evangelists were at the height of their popularity, there was one verse that was used and quoted more than any other to call people to make a choice that would affect their eternal destiny.

John 3:16

This became something of a cliché, a high pressure sales pitch, to be born again, to get saved or face eternal damnation. For those who have been hurt by the verse or that cultural interpretation, I am sorry. I hope that you will still be open to come on a journey with me today as we totally rethink what this verse and this whole passage has to say.

The Greek word for believe is *pisteuo*. This is more like a radical trust in the faithfulness of Jesus than a mental agreement to certain theological truths. I like to think of it more like the way you trust a bungee cord if you are going to bungee jump off a bridge into a ravine below you. You only do something that crazy if you really believe and really trust in the faithfulness and integrity of that bungee cord.

Another note on Greek words used here in this passage is the word behind **world**. It is actually *cosmos*. *Cosmos* includes more than just human beings, it includes everything. And if Jesus wanted to speak just

of human beings saved for eternity there are other Greek words for that. But the word in verse 16 and 17 that is repeated over and over is cosmos. And that is what we are going to focus on today.

The elements of nature in John 3:

- Water
- Wind--God's spirit blowing like the wind
- Heaven or sky
- Earth
- The world or cosmos
- The wilderness
- Light and darkness in verses 19 to 21

I have seen pictures of you worshipping outside in your garden of remembrance during covid. My home congregation, walnut hill Mennonite, also worshipped in the outdoors a lot for that period of time. While some seemed to be distracted and uncomfortable for me a whole new way of accessing and experiencing scripture and worship came alive. And it has led me to want to do that in a regular way no matter the weather, which is why I have started a wild church.

One of the gifts of reading scripture outside in nature is that passages that may have seemed more like spiritual metaphors before suddenly seem more like actual elements in nature. So with this passage for instance what if we were reading this outside where the very elements Jesus is talking about can be observed up front and personal. how would it affect our understanding of the passage?

as we feel, hear and observe the wind blowing around us might we understand that we don't control God any more than we control the wind?

Like the wind, we observe the organic movement of God's spirit but we don't tell it where to blow or how hard to blow or what direction it should blow in. And if we really got that would we do better at this radical trust (pisteuo) if we just let go of our need to control?

Might we understand that as we observe darkness turning to light and light to darkness and observing the stars in the heavens and how the earth rotates around the sun and the moon rotates around the earth and the earth also spinning and twisting but not in chaotic ways, but in predictable, life giving patterns that God is in control?

That God is the master of the universe?

That God is more creative and genius than any human being can even fathom?

Can we radically trust God and God's wisdom to reveal God's self to us in the cosmos if we can let go of our small, indoors thinking and open ourselves fully to the mystery?

Can we let the mystery of God stand in the dark and in the light and in the heavens and on the earth in the wilderness and in paradise, in war and in peace, in our questions and our answers?

Can we trust God? Who so loved the cosmos. That he gave Jesus.

pregnant pause

What if we approach one of the most famous verses in the whole Bible --John 3:16 --from this perspective? In nature, embracing nature and opening to the mystery of God's spirit moving as it will. As we contemplate what salvation even means?

In this passage I see four parts to this salvation

- God's love for the cosmos.
- That he gave Jesus
- And whoever radically trusts this Jesus who is a sign of God's love for the cosmos
- Will be bound up forever in life with the cosmos

bathed in God's love

Our believing, our radical trust in the faithfulness of Jesus, affects the whole cosmos!

The word for salvation in this passage is *sodzo* and it means to save, to keep safe and sound, to rescue from danger or destruction, but also to save a suffering one from disease, to make well, heal, restore to health.

The breadth of the meaning of the word salvation is much beyond what you may have heard growing up that is just about preserving this soul of yours, completely divorced from everyone and everything around it. How many of you might have heard that the world's going to hell in a handbasket so what does it matter how we treat it? Well, that doesn't really agree at all with what we just read in John 3:16 and 17. Now I know that there are other biblical passages and debates about the shaking of the earth and the heaven, and a new heaven and new earth while the old passes away, but can we just hold this passage in our hearts and minds long enough to let it inform our understanding of the bigger picture?

From this passage, we learn that this is God's intention for the cosmos, all the creatures, the plants, the planets, the water, and yes, human beings; to be part of rescuing from the danger of destruction, to restore to health for eternity.

In terms of our cosmic health—we must acknowledge how little we know—now in a phase of grave danger of destruction of our planet at least. While God promised not to destroy it again, there's no promise that human beings won't destroy it or at least make it less inhabitable than it is now.

What does it mean for us to be part of the salvation of the cosmos?

How will we as a congregation grapple with the implications?

What does trusting Jesus or believing in Jesus matter in the face of the danger of destruction? Like it says in verse 16: For God so loved the cosmos, that he gave Jesus, so that anyone who believes/trusts in Him will not perish but have eternal life.

Eternal destiny—heaven or hell. But does our understanding of our eternal destiny change if we think about what Jesus said here—that God sent him not to judge, not to condemn to destruction but to save the cosmos?

What does this mean in our particular place in the cosmos? I am glad to hear that you are grappling with that in how we understand this parcel of land that we own, the reasons for the garden, the reasons for

the building being here, the neighborhood, the relationships, the sense of my well-being is wrapped up in your well-being. The interconnectedness of it all. This whole ecosystem we are part of.

What does this mean in our own particular season of life as a congregation? –perspective of expansiveness of the whole cosmos, the bigness of God’s restorative, saving work. And yet our names are written on the palm of God’s hand; the intimacy of being known by name by our Creator.

I don’t know what it all means or barely even how to hold the fate of the cosmos and our believing in Jesus together.

The complexities of the causes and solutions to the climate crisis, land crisis, water crisis we’re in are some days just too much for me and I feel apathetic. Other days I focus on what’s right in front of me and do what I can.

My best advice in approaching this question, is to get outside, observe the mystery and wonder, the pain and the lament of reality as you contemplate how our salvation as human beings is connected with the love of God and eternal life in and with the cosmos.

But one thing I do know and that is that we can trust Jesus to teach us how to be born into a fuller, embodied salvation that is wrapped up with all of Creation.

And no matter our fate as a congregation, we are held with all of Creation in the love that sent Jesus into the cosmos in human form. Trust the love.