

John 3:1-17 2 Lent 3/20/11 Pastor Bill Uetricht

“For God so loved the *world*.” “For God so loved the *world*.”

The world. I don't know about you, but for me it seems that the world I know has been doing a lot of quaking lately. The world I knew doesn't seem so much like the world I know today. The world seems to be radically changing, trembling, even crumbling. Legal authorities are showing up in places I'd never had imagined. Federal agents raid the offices of the Muskegon Heights School District. Public workers are wondering about their jobs, certainly concerned about their rights. Public schools are facing significant cut backs. Teachers are worried about layoffs. Administrators are having to make terrible decisions. Friends are facing serious health problems. Egypt trembles. Libya gyrates. And worst of all, Japan falls victim to the quaking of the earth.

Honestly, I have been profoundly bothered recently by the images I have seen on television of whole Japanese villages being washed away by the movement of violent waters. The earth quaked. The waters then roared. And waves then swept away boats, cars, homes, huge buildings, animals, institutions, people. It swept away everything.

God so loved the *world*? In the Gospel of John the word “world” (cosmos) can refer to everything. God so loved the world. God so loved everything—its people, its land, its buildings, its insects, its animals, its goodness, its evil. The Gospel of John starts its story by taking us back to creation. “In the *beginning*,” John *begins*. John has his eyes focused on everything, on the entirety of creation. He is looking at the purpose and the meaning of everything. He has this notion that God is in the business of loving it all so that all of it can find its home in God. God so loved the **world**.

Really? Watching everything disintegrate I find it hard to trust that. Seeing what took hundreds and hundreds of years to create and nurture dissipate before your very eyes makes God's love for the world tough to trust. Maybe that is why it is easier for some to believe that all of this is planned out. You know, earthquakes, tsunamis, fires, sickness, death, injustices—they are just all a part of God's plan. They teach us a lesson. We learn from them.

An odd-duck woman showed up on "You Tube" the other night proclaiming that God is amazing; he answered her prayers. She had been praying to God for atheists to come to know God. And look, he responded. He sent the earthquake and the tsunami. Many of the Japanese didn't believe in the way that she thought that they should believe. So the earthquake was a wake-up call to them and to us. Now frankly, I didn't want to ask what she did with the Katrina catastrophe. Many victims of this hurricane were Christians—like her. Oh I forgot; they faced what they had to deal with because of homosexuality, abortion, and sexual immorality on the streets.

Oh, the world is such a neater place when everything is all planned out, when it is all so orderly. Oh, I don't have to do the tough work of integrating the bad tough stuff into my life. I just know that it's all a part of the plan. And what's more, I can continue to believe what I've always believed about life—about who the good guys and the bad guys are. Bad stuff happens to **them** because they are not doing the stuff I am doing. The planned-out mentality helps me feel good about myself. I really don't have to do the hard work to trust what in many ways seems difficult to trust--that God loves the *world*.

Our lessons for today seem very preoccupied with the big picture, not with a small place, a little piece of land, a few people. The *world*

seems to be the concern today. In Genesis we are told that God chooses Abram and Sarai from among all the scattered peoples to create a new nation that will become great, that will be given a great name, not for the sake of itself, but for the sake of all the nations, the world. Our Psalm for today sings a word of encouragement to travelers, telling them that they are free to travel because their help comes from the Lord who made *heaven and earth*, who made it all, everything, the cosmos. Our second lesson from Romans takes us back to the story of Abraham and highlights him as one who trusted the promises of God and one who invites all of us—*all* the nations of the world—to live by the same faith. It's the world that our lessons are preoccupied with. And it's the world that John tells us that God so loves.

John relays to us in today's gospel lesson a fascinating story about a leader of Israel, a Pharisee, Nicodemus, who has an interest in Jesus, but, like many in John, has this interest only because of the miracles that Jesus has done. And Jesus tells Nicodemus that that kind of interest isn't sufficient. Nicodemus, Jesus in John says, needs to go deeper. A fascination with Jesus and his ministry isn't enough. Nicodemus needs to go to the place where he is connected deeply to the person of Jesus and to the God whom Jesus represents. And that place is not something that Nicodemus can do, but is something that God does. It is a relationship given by God, a matter of being born from above. This is a relationship given by the Spirit of God, who blows where the Spirit blows. And at the center of that relationship is love—God's love for the whole world. It is this love for the whole world that Nicodemus is being invited into.

For John, that divine love is seen most fully in Jesus on the cross. And note. This cross is lifted up, just as Moses lifted up a snake on a pole in the desert to bring healing to the people of Israel. The cross is lifted up so that it can be seen—seen by whom? The whole world. Nicodemus was following Jesus because of the signs that he did. The truly big sign of the movement of God, a God of love, according to the gospel of John, is the cross. There we are met by a God who loves the world, everything and everybody.

I watch the waters roar, and I wonder: where is the love for the world, for all of creation? Love seems distant. It appears that God may have forgotten the world, forgotten the Japanese, forgotten us. Our friend and brother in the faith, Martin Luther, wrote the following about our Psalm for today:

Once in a while, it may appear that the Lord has forgotten about us. When we feel this way, we should remain steadfast in faith and await God's help and protection. Because even though it appears that God is sleeping or snoring . . . this is certainly not so, despite the way we think and feel. He is surely awake and watching over us . . . Eventually, we'll learn that, if we can only hold fast.

Faith is a tough business. Trusting the promise is not at all easy. And here is the promise: God loves the whole shooting match. God loves everything and everybody. God loves all that he has created. God loves a broken earth, a creation that longs and cries and sighs. God loves broken people, you and me—people who long and cry and sigh.

Hold steadfast. Hold steadfast and maybe hold somebody else's hand until you can trust that. Hold steadfast, glancing at the cross, the sign of the cosmic love of God. And while you remain steadfast, love

the whole shooting match yourself. Love yourself, your neighbor, your enemy, those who suffer, the Japanese, the Libyans, those who are imprisoned, those who are victims and those who are victimizers, the animals, the insects, the ground that you walk, the lake you swim in, the woods you hunt in, the geography that you claim as your own and that which belongs to someone else. Love it all because God so loves the *world*.

And while you are loving it all, pray and long and wait for your faith to become sight. Pray and long and wait for that day when the God of wind and water calms all the storms, settles the earth, stops the waves, does away with all injustice, heals all the brokenness. I don't know about you, but I am ready for that day.