

## **Into the Landscape: The World**

*A sermon preached on John 3:14-21 by Emily Hull McGee  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on March 11, 2018*

The story goes something like this —

Once upon a time, a woman set out to discover the meaning of life. She began by reading everything she could get her hands on — history, philosophy, psychology, religion, math, you name it. Doing so, she became a very smart person, no doubt, but nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for. She found other smart people and asked *them* about the meaning of life, but while their discussions were long and lively, no two of them agreed on the same thing and still she had no answer.

Frustrated, the woman finally put all her belongings in storage and set off in search of the meaning of life. She went to South America. She went to India. She went to New Zealand. Everywhere she went, people told her they did not know the meaning of life, but they had heard of a man who did, only no one was quite sure where he lived. She asked about this man in every country on earth until finally, deep in the Himalayas, someone told her how to reach the man's house.

Of course it was a tiny little hut perched on the side of a mountain just below the tree line, so the woman climbed and climbed to reach his front door. When she finally got there, her knees scraped up and knuckles so cold they hardly worked, she knocked.

"Yes?" said the kind-looking old man who opened it. She thought she would die of happiness. "Sir, I have come literally around the world to ask you

but one question," she said, gasping for breath. She paused for a fraction of a second before she blurted out: "What is the meaning of life?"

The old man smiled, and with a hand outstretched, said, "please come in and have some tea."

"No," the woman said, completely caught off-guard. "I mean, no thank you. I didn't come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. So won't you tell me, please, what is the meaning of life?"

"We shall have tea," the old man said more firmly this time, so she gave up and came inside. While he was brewing the tea, her knuckles began to thaw, but she didn't hasten a moment to tell the man about all the books she had read, all the people she had met, all the places she had been. The old man listened (which was just as well, since his visitor did not leave any room for him to reply), and as she talked he placed a fragile tea cup in her hand. Then he began to pour the tea.

She was so busy talking, that she did not notice when the tea cup was full, so the old man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides of the cup and spilled to the floor in a steaming waterfall.

"What are you doing?!" she yelled when the tea burned her hand. "It's full, can't you see that? Stop! There's no more room!"

"Just so," the old man said to her. "You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no more room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and then we will talk."<sup>1</sup>

Our hands full, our minds stuffed, our calendars packed, our opinions firm, we the world go out *into* the world, searching for that elusive meaning

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<sup>1</sup> Story attributed both to Henri Nouwen and retold here primarily from Barbara Brown Taylor's adaption in her brilliant essay, "Stay for Tea, Nicodemus," *The Christian Century*, February 1996.

of life, do we not? For some of us, the thing we seek might be the right answers, the sharpest apologetic for the way of life to which we so intensely cling. For others, we're on a quest for the one thing – the relationship, the job, the salary, the skill, the adventure, the look, the status – that one thing which will be for us the silver bullet to make life all fall into place and make sense. But even as we journey into the world, looking for that answer or question or thing that will be for us the missing piece, we do so with a pretty firm grasp upon the landscape of things as we know them to be, right? We know what we believe, who we like and who we don't, what we're willing to do to find that meaning of life and what limits we simply won't cross. For who wants to run the risk of discovering that the world exists outside the box we put it in?

We seem to take this age-old cue from folks like Nicodemus. The Gospel of John tells us he's a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews. One preacher wryly described Nicodemus, saying, "Nicodemus is one of us. He is the chair of the religion department and a mover and shaker in the ministerial association. He has a blog called 'Religion for Grown-ups.' ... Nicodemus is a patron saint for preachers who have lots of questions."<sup>2</sup> (Lord knows I'm familiar with the type!) Religious leader or not, Nicodemus is like so many of us who know what we know – particularly those of us who have lived a life of faith for years, who pride ourselves in following the rules, and taking ourselves seriously, and toeing the party line, and being in control, and doing what's right, and noting with a hint of judgment those around us who aren't.

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<sup>2</sup> Brett Younger, "John 3:1-8" and "John 3:9-15," *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, vol. 1, p57, 63.

Who knows what was stirring in Nicodemus's life that night he went to see Jesus, what prompted him to slip out under the cover of darkness to ask the questions he wouldn't dare allow to see the light of day to the One he wouldn't dare be caught asking them. We don't know if Nicodemus was facing a crisis of health or relationship, the loss of a loved one, depression that he couldn't seem to shake or doubts that seem to have infected everything. We don't know if he was frustrated by the systems that kept giving more to the well-resourced while taking more from the wanting. We don't know if he was simply seeking the meaning of life! But whatever nudged him to Jesus, Nicodemus seemed to sense that what he already knew was incomplete, what he regularly did was unexamined, what he had believed was insufficient to silence those 3:00am questions that sent him seeking more.

Jesus's instruction that to enter the kingdom of God, one must first be born from above was met with immediate questions — “how can an old person be born again? Do you have to reenter the womb and do it all over? *How can this be?*” And to Nicodemus and all the exacting, rule-following, ‘put all the world in a box’ literalists for generations to come, Jesus proclaimed a message of More, of beyond, of expansion, of abundance. For from the beginning, there was the Word. For into the darkness, let there be light. For what has come into being was life. *For God so loved the world, that out of this abundance and overflow of love, God gave God's one and only son.*

This kind of love has the power beyond all we could ask or imagine. It blows a hole in all our arguments, it runs counter to all the things we know to be fixed and finite, it presses up against every answer we've ever given, every truth we've ever held dear, every certainty we've ever let coax us into

complacency. This kind of love overflows like a waterfall of tea poured continuously into a finite teacup – wild, uncontained, flowing without abandon. But unlike hot tea, it is a love that refuses to scald us into injury. This love is given fully and freely through Jesus Christ, done so because God’s love for this world is so unconditional, it’s practically offensive.

A preacher named Dave that I love to read tells of the time years ago he preached a sermon about the offensive nature of God’s grace, grace we don’t earn and thus don’t deserve, but grace that chases us down nonetheless. In the sermon, Pastor David suggested they add four little words to their baptism ceremony, where they practiced this outward sign of God’s invisible grace. “Child of God,” he would say each time to the baptismal candidate, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit... like it or not.” “Like it or not,” the addition to the liturgy that pointed to that offensive grace that just won’t wash off no matter how many times you try.

A few weeks after Brother Dave preached that sermon, a friend of his told him about a bedtime encounter he had with his then six year-old son. As kids are wont to do, little Benjamin was upset about being put to bed early and hollered out as his dad was turning off the light, “Daddy, I hate you!” With a measure of the parental wisdom we all hope for, Benjamin’s dad responds by saying, “Ben, I’m sorry you feel that way, but I love you.” “Don’t say that!” Ben cried out in the dark. “Dont’!” “I’m sorry, Benjamin, but it’s true. I love you.” “Don’t say that again!,” the boy’s protest heated up. And in a stroke of inspiration – or perhaps a fresh wind of the Spirit – Benjamin’s dad remembered that sermon and added, “Benjamin, I love you... like it or not!”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Story told by David Lose in his reflection on John 3:16 from March 9, 2015: <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/lent-4-b/>

Like it or not, God so loved this world that God didn't ask our permission before sending Jesus to save us from ourselves. Like it or not, God's love is just as accessible for the perfectionists as it is the individualists and the peacemakers, just as available for the achievers as it is the adventurers and the loyal skeptics, just as attainable for the helpers as it is the observers and the protectors.<sup>4</sup> Like it or not, God's love isn't just for us Christians to maintain or to manage, to dole out or to store up. Like it or not, for God so loved the *world*... not 'for God so loved America,' or 'for God so loved the church, the rule-followers, the faithful, the ones with the good questions or the right answers, the ones with the deepest beliefs or the purest thoughts.' Like it or not, God's love in Jesus chases after and finds the whole lot of us in each little nook and cranny of this created world – bosses and worker bees, soccer moms and teenage boys, those stuck in their homes and those with no home at all, pierced and fierce, cynical and hopeful and done and put upon. God's love for the world is ours to receive; dare we risk what it means to accept it?

Somehow in the ongoing telling of this most famous of scripture verses, we in the church who claim to have answers and like our world firmly in the boxes of our own design somehow manage to skew this abundant Love that promises life everlasting to be Love with strings attached, Love under the threat of judgment. But if we read carefully verse 17, we'll be reminded that, in the words of the evangelist, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Or as one theologian put it, "the [mission of God in the world] is life-

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<sup>4</sup> I hope you hear strains of the Enneagram in how God's love is shared – all nine types receive in equal measure, not one over another.

giving and life-saving. This is not a rejection mission. It is a rescue mission.”<sup>5</sup> God loved us with such abundance, that God sent Jesus to all the perishing so that the alternative of life everlasting might be available to any who choose it. There will be judgment, Jesus makes clear, judgment between those who take the leap of faith and trust in this One who bears the Light and Love of God and those unwilling to jump. But let me be clear — the judgment and condemnation Jesus speaks of is not from God — *for God so loved the world!* Rather the condemnation is self-inflicted, and it comes when we opt out of that ‘like it or not’ kind of love. It comes when we choose to stay in the dark, when we fill our cups with all we know to be true leaving not an ounce of room for Love beyond all we could ask or imagine. It comes when we condemn ourselves to more of the same, to the living hell of the ‘real world’, to the things and the answers and the achievements and the power we think can save our lives.<sup>6</sup>

Brothers and sisters, from wherever in this world you might be located today, in the darkneses of our world and of our own doing, what might happen if we came to the One who came to us as Light for all? What might happen if we lifted high the cross where Love came finally and fully in Jesus? What might happen if we realized that God’s love always drowns out our judgment, enabling us to cry out with Paul, “there is therefore now no condemnation.”<sup>7</sup> What might happen if we lived as if God really did love the

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<sup>5</sup> Edwin Searcy, “John 3:16-21,” *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, vol. 1, p70.

<sup>6</sup> I was greatly helped in this sermon prep from the interpretation of condemnation from God vs. self-inflicted condemnation put forth by Edwin Searcy, “John 3:16-21,” *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, vol. 1, p70.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:1

world? It may be that the meaning of life we run all over the world to so desperately seek has been right here with us all the time, if only we'd be willing to step into the light, take a leap of faith, pull up a seat, and have a cup of tea. It might just save your life.