

SAVED AS A GIFT
(John 3:1-17)

If you've ever watched a football game on television, you probably noticed a hand-painted sign that doesn't have anything to do with the game draped over a railing in the endzone. It simply reads *John 3:16*. A lot of sheets have been sacrificed over the years making those signs – and I have to wonder, “Why? To what end?” Do the sign makers hope fans will pull out their Bibles at the next timeout and look it up? Somehow I don't see that happening. But maybe. Or do they assume fans will know right off what that verse says?

That assumption might not be too far off in this case. There are just a few verses in the Bible that people are apt to recognize on sight, and this is one: *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.*

Familiar, but maybe not so well understood.

That was one of the verses I learned back in the Dark Ages when Sunday school kids still memorized Bible verses. The message we were supposed to take away was that we had better believe in Jesus or else. The choice was clear: believe and be saved or don't believe and be damned. There was a bright line separating believers from non-believers, and nobody wanted to be on the wrong side..

I don't know for sure, but I suspect that the folks who hang out the signs think it really is just that simple. But I don't think so. Actually, I'm pretty sure it's not that simple – for a couple of reasons.

In the first place there's the question of what it means to “believe.” Now that's a word we use all the time. We all know what it means and we believe all sorts of things. We believe that $2+2=4$. We believe that the earth is round. We believe that it's cold at the North Pole. In one sense those are intellectual propositions. We believe they are factually true.

But believing is more than intellectual assent to a proposition or claim. Real belief involves trust and it involves acting on that trust. Sitting here in Andover on a beautiful first day of spring it really doesn't make much difference what I believe about the temperature at the North Pole. But if I sign on for an expedition to the North Pole, I'm going to pack the warmest coat I can find. In other words, my belief influences what I do.

So what does it mean to “believe in Jesus”? That a Jew by that name lived in Palestine 2000 years ago nobody doubts. Well, maybe a few fringe element skeptics but they're kind of like people who believe the earth is flat and nobody takes them seriously. So believing in Jesus must mean more than merely believing that he existed.

What about the miracles the gospels report? There opinions start to multiply and things get more interesting. Did he really calm a storm? Did he really feed 5000 people with five loaves of bread and a couple of fish? Did he really heal all those sick people? Some believe he did them all. Some believe

he healed the sick but have some doubts about the nature miracles. Some believe he didn't perform any miracles.

Again we need to ask, "What difference does it make?" Nicodemus believed that Jesus had done some amazing things, but that didn't lead him to what we would call faith. For Nicodemus the signs merely proved that Jesus was "a teacher who has come from God." So even believing that Jesus had some extraordinary powers wasn't enough to produce faith.

C.S. Lewis was one of the great Christian apologists of the last century, in addition to being a professor at Oxford. He didn't start out as a Christian and only became one in gradual steps. First he came to believe in God but still didn't believe that Jesus was anything special. But on September 28, 1931, he and his brother Warren took a picnic lunch to Whipsnade Zoo. His brother was driving a motorcycle and Lewis was riding in the sidecar. Lewis wrote later, "When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did."

Whatever happened on the way to the zoo – and Lewis didn't really understand it himself and is exasperatingly vague when it comes to describing what happened that day – whatever happened changed his life in every way imaginable. If belief doesn't change us in some serious way, it's probably not belief in the sense of faith, but something else.

One way to describe that change is to say it's like being "born again," another expression that comes with a lot of baggage. For some of our more conservative brothers and sisters, "born again" means having some kind of conversion experience that you can point to; you can pinpoint the day and maybe even the hour. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is the model – sudden, dramatic, unmistakable. Or like C.S. Lewis riding in the sidecar on the way to the zoo.

There's another way to think about being born again, though. And someone as unevangelical as Marcus Borg points us in that direction. He even titles a chapter in one of his books "Born Again: A New Heart" (*The Heart of Christianity*).

It's something like what William Wordsworth wrote

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

(*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*)

And he goes on about how we lose that sense of where we come from and what's our real home until the vision "fade[s] into the light of common day."

Being born again means being reconnected with God, from whom we come and in whom we have our being. It means dying to the false self that is

shaped by the world and being reborn to a life in the Spirit. It means dying to an old way of being and living into a new way of being.

And that's not a sudden, dramatic revelation, but a gradual, step-by-step process that continues for a lifetime. And that's what it means when we talk about salvation.

I mentioned at the beginning that I learned in Sunday school that believing in Jesus is our ticket to heaven, that being saved means going to heaven instead of hell. In fact, though, the Bible really doesn't say much about life after death. Yes, it does talk about it, but heaven as our goal when we die isn't the central message. Salvation in the Bible is something that happens primarily in this life. It happens here, it happens now. Salvation is about healing and wholeness – and healing and wholeness come from knowing God.

So when we hear, "For God so loved the world..." don't hear it just as a roadmap to heaven. Hear it as an invitation to a richer, fuller, transformed life in this world. Being saved, having eternal life means we live in God, we move in God, we have our being in God, and when we die, we die into God.

And all because God does so love the world.