

“Eternal Life Now”

John 10:22-30

When I was in seminary, a student asked a professor, “Why don’t people believe that Jesus is the Son of God based on the evidence since the evidence is so clear?” To which the professor replied, “Christian evidence is clear only to Christians.” In our text today, we see this played out. Some hostile Jews come to Jesus and demand that he tell them plainly if he is the Messiah. Rather than give a straight answer—one that would be summarily rejected—Jesus asks them to consider the works that he did in his Father’s name. These were mostly acts of compassion such as healings and feedings, not the kind of evidence they were looking for. They wanted a militaristic Messiah, one who would take up the sword against Rome. What they got instead was just the opposite.

There is a psychological mind trick called confirmation bias. Some are not open to truth and believe what they want to believe. So, they look for evidence that supports their desired outcomes and reject evidence that is contrary to it. These Jews wanted a specific kind of Messiah. Jesus’ actions did not correspond to their biases, so they rejected him.

In this text, Jesus refers to another kind of observer, those who hear the Shepherd’s voice and follow him. The payoff? They are given eternal life.

Last Sunday I introduced the theme of universal salvation that appears at the end of the book of Revelation. God’s redemptive work culminates with the entire cosmos being brought into the original perfection that in the beginning God declared very good. Eternal life is now the constant state of being for everyone. No exceptions. Just like we say in our invitation to the Lord’s Supper, “All are invited to this table; no one is excluded. All means all.”

Yes, this seems to be the outcome that the recipient of the revelation given to John was told to tell the churches. Ultimately everyone and everything will be redeemed, will be brought back into original goodness. This has been criticized by the likes of Karl Marx as the opiate of the masses which the prospect of a heavenly reward makes them content to suffer exploitation in this life. You know, “pie in the sky by and by.” But in our text today, we are introduced to an entirely different understand of eternal life. It is not something we wait for to be revealed in the end. Rather, eternal life is present, is available in the here and now! Jesus says, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.”

What? Eternal life now? We have difficulty with this notion because we depend more on the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke and not John. Raymond E. Brown, a leading expert in the Gospel of John, points out that in the synoptic gospels eternal life is something received at the final judgment, or a future age

(Mark 10:30, Matthew 18:8-9) but the Gospel of John positions eternal life as a present possibility, as in John 5:24.

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Later in John, Jesus says, “**Now this is eternal life:** *that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent*” (John 17:3)

In John, the purpose for the incarnation of the Word was to provide eternal life to humanity. So, why is this so different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke?

You may recall that last Sunday I mentioned that Jesus taught, and the early disciples believed, that shortly after Jesus ascended into heaven he would return and set up the kingdom of God in their generation. Jesus describes the events that will lead up to his return and ends by saying, “*Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.*” Matthew 24:34

The synoptic gospels were written between 70 and 85 CE. By then, Jesus had not returned, and the Jesus’ generation has all but passed away. 2nd Peter has someone ask, “*Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!*” Jesus’ return was no longer accepted as a literal event. Eternal life moved from heaven to earth in John’s thinking.

But what can eternal life now mean? As I have come to understand it, eternal life now is participating in all things as though the world was already redeemed. It is the experience of a community where we live for the sake of one another, just as we will in the perfected afterlife. It is living out the two Great Commandments where the love of God is so palpable that it spills over into our love of neighbor regardless of whom it may be. It is the working out of the petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

That petition is the marching order for the church. It is the culmination of the church working in partnership with God to create God’s intentions for the world. So—how is this done? How are humans able to accomplish this? Short answer: the same way that Jesus was able to accomplish this. By listening to the Shepherd’s voice. When we are told we need to be like Jesus, many feel defeated before they begin. “How can I be like Jesus,” they think, “since Jesus was divine and I’m not?” Regardless of the credal confession that Jesus was wholly human and wholly divine, we ignore the human side of Jesus. It took three centuries before the doctrine of the Trinity was worked out. Ever since the humanity of Jesus has been eclipsed by his divinity and appreciation for Jesus as a human being is diminished if not totally ignored. And by human being I mean there is no difference between the human that was Jesus and the human that is you or me.

All the things Jesus accomplished he accomplished ONLY through his humanity. So he could look his disciples in the eye and say this:

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes [trusts] in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.... John 14.12

For Christians, Jesus of Nazareth exemplifies the highest form of one who listened to God's beseeching voice. He so enabled God's will in his life that it could be said of him that to see him was to see God. So, we say that God was incarnated in him. IOW, God's purpose was replicated in Jesus. Some take this literally, others such as I, take it metaphorically.

I think Christianity, by taking this literally, has stunted our faith. How so? By limiting the reality of incarnation to Jesus, we eliminate that possibility in ourselves. And when we eliminate it in ourselves, we deprive the world of the presence of God extended through our lives

This is why Jesus recognized those who provided water, clothing, and comfort to those in need in the great judgment scene in Matthew. It's a way of bringing God to bear in our world. I think the only way. For prayer to be effective it must be accompanied by action.

Can you really incarnate God in your life, your flesh? The writer of the book of Hebrews noted that Jesus learned obedience through suffering. Just what kind of suffering, perhaps trial-and-error; we're not sure. Jesus "learned" obedience. It wasn't born into him. Luther went to the extreme of saying that Jesus ran the universe from the cradle. No. Jesus, just as with you and me, learned how to be God in the world.

Even John 1:1 is instructive here. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Word or logos in Greek has many meanings. Chief among them is wisdom. In Proverbs, we find Wisdom is personified as the companion of God before the creation and in fact the mediator of creation. Listen to Proverbs 8.

*Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like
a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,*

*rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.*

Jesus so perfectly became the vessel that contained the wisdom of God that he could be said to have enfleshed it.

In the words of Athanasias: "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God." Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is a human fully alive." We become fully alive when we allow God to act through us in our world. God could not tend to the wounds of the stranger left to die beside the road to Jericho. Only the Samaritan could. Or one like the Samaritan, one who let God work through him. When we pray to God to enter into the life of someone, we are praying for someone like the Samaritan or even ourselves to be that agent of God.

I do not want you to sell yourself short. You, too, could be an incarnation. That is, if you were given that possibility from your childhood. But you were robbed of it by the very church that should have taught you that your life can bring the presence of God into the world just as Jesus' life did. But they didn't. They limited that possibility to only one. But it is not too late. God is lurking inside you, waiting to be born in the world by your willingness to be God's agent in the world. "God is waiting to be disclosed," said Rabbi Heschel, "to be admitted into our lives. Our task is to open ourselves to God, to let God enter our deeds."

Many preachers in my generation were exposed in preaching classes to the story of the preacher who labored over a sermon that would convince his listeners of his brilliance. When he got to the pulpit, a note awaited him that read, "We would see Jesus." He set aside his prepared sermon and showed them Jesus.

In Mark, Jesus interrupted someone who called him "Good teacher," and rebuked him with "No one is good but God alone." And in John, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." That was always the issue for Jesus—pointing people to God and away from self. This is precisely the mode of discipleship that we who follow Jesus should emulate. For when we are faithful in service, we bring God into the world.

So, when you give articles to the thrift store, or prepare or hand out sandwiches for the Hope Van, or pass a few bucks to a needy person, or comfort a distraught friend, or sit with a sick person, or get your children to church, or fret over an elder's table talk, or do the thousands of little things that bring life to others, you are bringing God to bear on the world. Yes, you.

One of the earliest sermon illustrations has Jesus entering heaven following the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. The angels saw that he was wearing the crown of thorns, that his hands and feet were pierced with nails, and his side was sliced open. "Oh, my Lord, how you have suffered for the sake of humanity. How

are you going to let everyone know of this?" To which Jesus replied, "I have left 11 disciples behind to become for the world what I was for the world." But what if that isn't enough?" asked the angel?" Then they will never know." AMEN