

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**March 18, 2012**  
**John 3:14-21**  
**“A Healing Journey: A World So Loved”**

Over the last few weeks, around the table at our staff meetings or on our church’s website and Facebook page, there has been a lot of conversation on the topic of how to describe our church. How would you invite someone to visit East Liberty Presbyterian Church in just a few words? I heard a lot of good suggestions: Come to our church, it combines traditional architecture and progressive theology. Or this: We believe that, better than having all the answers is asking the right questions. Or this one: Do you listen to NPR and believe in God? So do we! As effective as such slogans might be, at some point a deeper question needs to be asked: Why do we believe in God, in Jesus, in the church? Why do you honestly believe?

That can be a hard question to answer honestly. Skeptics of the Christian faith insist that many people believe in God because they are afraid of death. They believe in a God who promises a life beyond death. No one can deny that death is a hard concept to accept. We can barely conceive of what it might mean not “to be,” not to exist. We are uncomfortable imagining moving from life to a time of non-life and nothingness. So we seek out ways to talk about an afterlife and therefore about a God who is Lord of a life after death. Freud claimed this belief is only an illusion, an example of wish fulfillment. Christians argue back that it is more than wishful thinking; it is something grounded in the resurrection good news of Easter. However, at times we wish we had a better answer for skeptics to that hard question about death.

Why do you honestly believe? Another incomplete answer is that people believe in a God who makes things right in the end, who blesses the good folks, those who’ve suffered unjustly or were unfairly treated in this life, while punishing those who did lots of things wrong and who got away with evil during their lifetime. I read an interview with Vince Gilligan, who created the current television show “Breaking Bad,” about a regular dad whose life goes crazy as he’s pulled into a world of illegal drugs and street crime. The show constantly stresses that actions have consequences and bad actions have bad consequences. Gilligan admits that he personally finds comfort in the idea that there is some comeuppance or karma active in life, even if it takes years or decades to happen. He said, “My philosophy [is this]: I want to believe there’s a heaven. But I can’t not believe there’s a hell.”<sup>1</sup>

I’ve just given you two common responses to the prior question about why someone believes in God: 1) I believe in God because I struggle with death and so I want there to be a heaven; and 2) I believe in God because I struggle with the presence of evil in this world and so I want there to be a hell. These are straightforward answers to a perplexing question. But there’s one problem. Both those answers use *us* as their point of reference. Both start with you and me: we are afraid of death; we are angry at evil in the world; and then the focus moves from our situation out to God, heaven and hell. What about an answer to the question of faith that moves in the opposite



direction, an answer that considers things from God's perspective and then moves from there to us? Will that work?

Today's passage from John 3 tries to do just that. The verses I read contain three parts: the mention of an episode involving Moses, a closing section about light, darkness and judgment, and sandwiched between are the famous verses of John 3:16 - 17. Let's look briefly at each. Back in Numbers 21, we read how the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, with wandering being the operative word here. They were tired, impatient, and cranky; their sandals hurt; they weren't sleeping well; they had lousy cellphone reception. Scripture says they complained: *Why have you brought us out here to die? There is no food and no water, and we're sick of eating manna.* Notice their self-focus, always starting with their own needs and then moving on to make demands of God. Suddenly the Israelites really had something to complain about: a plague of poisonous snakes came upon them, biting them. This brought about a change of heart – a spirit of repentance and prayer – so that Moses was told to make an image of one of the snakes, place it on a high pole, and as the people looked at it, they would be healed. Once the people took their eyes off themselves, their own gripes and complaints, and lifted their eyes higher, in effect, up toward God; in that act, they were healed.

Jesus here is making a prediction about his own death and resurrection. He points back at the incident with the Israelites and says, *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* Jesus is saying that the Son of Man will be lifted up on a cross, lifted up on Easter morning, and lifted up on the day of ascension; and in those acts, the promise of life at its fullest is given to us. Now John's gospel was composed in a community that was being persecuted from all angles for their beliefs in Christ, much as if they were being swarmed by a plague of poisonous snakes. John wants to offer words of comfort to this fledgling Christian group, and so he talks about light and darkness, and how those who lift up their eyes toward the light and believe in Christ are healed and set free from judgment. But those whose deeds are evil are rejecting the light, which means they are still in the wilderness, stumbling in the darkness, and carrying the weight of judgment with them wherever they go.

In the middle of the passage are two pivotal verses: John 3:16, *For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* But don't stop there; always go on to John 3:17: *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* All the action in these verses starts with God, not with us. It doesn't begin with us, with our wilderness or serpent encounters, our fear of death or persistent desires for revenge. No, it is a different perspective; one that begins with God and God's love. And that changes all answers when questions of faith are raised.



Remember how we asked: “Who are we? Progressive Christians in a traditional sanctuary space? An NPR listener who belongs to a Presbyterian congregation? Someone who struggles with death and the presence of evil in this world?” Even if all those are true, John would have you preface them with Jesus’ words: You are a part of a world that God loves so much ... that God sent God’s Son to us, loved so much that God extends eternal life to us; loved so much that salvation, not condemnation, is the goal of it all. We are a world deeply loved by God.

A world so deeply loved. That is a perspective which begins, not with fear, not with pride, not with anger or judgment or division, but with a foundational truth that is life-giving. It is a perspective of awe: of gratitude for a world that supplies our needs, a perspective of hope for a world that can sustain different cultures and traditions on a global scale, a perspective of passion as we seek to protect the least and the vulnerable, for they too are loved. This perspective moves us to act *environmentally*, for the world God loves is not just humanity, but all creatures great and small, rocks, minerals, and rushing rivers. This perspective moves us to protect *women’s rights* nationally and internationally, for one sad commonality between extremism of all types, whether political or religious, is a desire to subjugate women and deny their equality, their self-worth, and their giftedness. This perspective moves us to act for justice and enact laws that are fair to all. It moves us to be engaged, rather than locking ourselves behind thick doors, red-lined residential zones of privilege, or in isolated communities of segregation and intolerance.

That may sound like mere rhetoric and generalities. If so, remember the words in John 3:21: *Those who do what is true come to the light that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God:* within God’s fellowship, within God’s love and salvation for all people. To return to the opening question: *Why do we believe?* We believe because we exist in a world so loved by God that we have a confidence that heals and moves us from places of darkness to light. For it’s here, in this God-loved world, that we grieve over the reality of death, but we do not grieve as ones without hope, for every conversation about death is linked to the story of Jesus being lifted up, and that story ends not with death but with life. It’s here, in this God-loved world, that we feel frustration over the presence of evil, even to the point of wanting revenge; but Christ calls us to step away from such thoughts and see things from a life-giving perspective that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It is here, in this God-loved world, that by grace we do what is true and by faith we trust in a power and love and majesty that far exceeds our own. For God so loved the world, all in the world, each and every one of us. That is our starting point as we turn to others and, by word and deed, answer the personal question “Here’s why I believe...”

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> David Segal, “The Art of Darkness,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 10, 2011, p. 20.

