

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

March 5, 2023 – LENT 2, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: “*Directions to Heaven? Only One Way*”\*

Genesis 12:1-4a (Abraham obeys God)  
Psalm 121 (We lift our eyes to the Lord, from whom comes our help)  
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 (God credits Abraham’s faith—not his deeds—as righteousness)  
St. John 3:1-17 (Jesus teaches that in order to be saved, we must be born anew)

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Today, we heard about “Nick at Night,” St. John’s story of the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who dared to come and talk with the controversial rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, under cover of darkness. He sincerely sought answers about God, and sensed that Jesus had them. As a result, today’s Gospel contains one of the most well-known and beloved verses in the Bible, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” That’s the entire Gospel in a nutshell. Although the New Testament never explicitly tells us Nicodemus came to believe, St. John mentions that he defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin [religious council] (7:50-51) and later assisted Joseph of Arimathea in giving the crucified Christ a proper burial (19:39-42).

John 3:16 sums up the content of the Christian message in one sentence: God came into the world in the Person of His Son, Jesus, and asks that we believe in Him; for Jesus Christ is the One who saves us from death and hell by His death and resurrection. Sounds great! Then why is this so hard for many to accept or believe? Mostly, it’s because people don’t like to hear there’s only one way to God, or to heaven. Somehow, to them that sounds mean or unfair. They miss the point that Jesus’ invitation is open to anyone and everyone, no strings attached.

Most of us tend to be surrounded by fellow Christians, or else sporadic church-goers and a few lapsed Catholics, Methodists, or Episcopalians. We church folk don’t tend to come into much contact with outright atheists, or people who hold beliefs that are totally contrary from ours, which they have cobbled together from New Age spirituality or the postmodern mindset of our culture.

New Agers teach there is no such thing as sin or hell; Jesus was not God; and each of us can become divine through connecting with the Cosmic Consciousness. To do so will make our lives blissful and successful. Postmodernism claims there are no absolute or authoritative truths. “Truth” is whatever you, or I, or our particular peer group, think it is. Likewise, all religions are the same. In my Doctor of Ministry classes, I read about how unchurched people think today, but for the most part, I just don’t tend to encounter them in reality.

That is, until I tried to correspond with a cousin of mine who lives on the West Coast. He posted on Facebook that the several tragedies around the globe made him think about how someday all of us are going to be dust. Knowing that my cousin is an atheist, and remembering our penitential liturgy of Ash Wednesday, I posted back: “Repent and believe the Gospel, and you will be saved.” *Oh my*, did that unleash a barrage of messages! Immediately, he wrote back, “Believe in what? Be saved from what?” I responded: “It’s not a ‘what’ you believe in, but ‘whom,’ and that is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. When you do, you will be saved from death and hell.”

I must say, I didn’t expect my cousin’s response. He wrote: We are “NEVER separated from the love and mercy of what I’ll agree to name God, for the moment. Those who promulgate the concept of hell do so only to maintain their power .... Such vanity and self-deception is in fact what all of us need saving from.” In other words, we Christians have invented the concept of hell so we can act self-righteous toward others, because a good and loving God would never separate us from Himself. Now, on the face of it, the last part sounds true. Sure, God does love us all very much—even my cousin.

However, the New Living Translation of Romans 3:23 tells us more about how God sees us: “*Everyone* has sinned; we *all* fall short of God’s glorious standard.” Yes, God loves us just as He finds us: miserable sinners. Only, He loves us too much to leave us as we are. In 2 Peter 3:9 (ISV), we read: God “does not want anyone to perish, but wants everyone to repent.”

Not content with his earlier remark, my cousin proceeded to write a veritable essay on Facebook. He fancies himself a poet, and most of what he wrote was semi-indecipherable, so I’ll translate: He was basically asking, why would a loving God consign anyone to hell, and why can’t we have a relationship with God without an intermediary? In other words, why can’t we just be saved by appealing to a loving God directly? Well, those were actually good questions.

First of all, we don’t know why God created hell as a place of punishment for those who reject Him. But we trust that what the Bible says is true, and the Scriptures are clear that whoever rejects Christ—the *only intermediary* between sinful humankind and God—ends up there. That’s just how it is. We don’t make the rules. God does.

Second, the reason we cannot have a direct relationship with our loving Heavenly Father is the problem of human sin. We are prevented from intimacy with God until our sins are cleared from God’s slate. As I wrote back to my cousin: “The issue isn’t *God’s love*—it’s *our sin*. Anyone who hears the news knows there’s evil in the world. Sin is what hurts people, animals, or nature—thereby hurting God. Kind of like, if your child hits another kid, you feel bad. We humans punish our children when they do wrong. God wanted sin to be punished, but there was nothing humans could do to atone for the amount of sin in the entire world. (Just saying “Sorry” isn’t enough.) So God came to do the job Himself. That would be as though God said, ‘I’m going to forgive your entire \$50,000 credit-card debt, without conditions. Just accept it.’ God paid our *cosmic* debt. Personally, I find that pretty cool!”

So then my cousin responded with another argument, the gist of which was: Humans have the free will to go to hell until they’re tired of it, and then they can freely choose to go to heaven. *That’s* certainly a radical view of free will! Unfortunately, the way God set things up, it doesn’t work that way. We have to choose one or the other. A street evangelist friend of mine used to describe eternity as: “smoking or non-smoking.”

So I wrote back to my cousin: “Yes, God has given us free will. Although He wants everyone to be saved, He will never coerce us to become part of His family, to receive His love, grace, forgiveness, and help. He makes the offer. If we decline, we send ourselves to hell.” Now how do you think my cousin responded to that? *Not a word*. Silence ... all the way from Washington State. End of discussion.

Why? Unbelievers don’t want to hear that by our own failure to accept Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for us; by our refusal to believe that Jesus is God in human flesh; and by our denial of His life, death, and resurrection, we condemn ourselves for eternity.

After all this back-and-forth on Facebook—from a cousin who hasn’t actually *spoken to me* in almost 40 years—I said to Rick, “Christianity really is a hard sell.” Rick answered, “That’s because it makes demands on us. It requires us to change, and to live God’s way, instead of ours.” My husband is right. In the world outside the Church, people don’t want demands placed on them, they prefer to shirk responsibility, and everyone wants to have their own way—as I talked about, last week.

But human nature hasn’t changed since the beginning of time. The New Age / Postmodernist twist on reality is only a fancy version of original sin. Ever since the Garden of Eden, humans have defied God’s will and opted for their own personal choices. And we saw in last Sunday’s Old Testament lesson from Genesis just how well that went for Adam and Eve.

The reason I decided to share with you this exchange with my cousin is that there are people all over America who think the same way he does. False religions tell them: “God’s OK, and you’re OK.” Their “god” is some warm-fuzzy cosmic force whose benevolence simply radiates through the universe, and all we have to do is download it to our consciousness. Gee, that sounds a lot easier than “repent and believe the Gospel,” “trust and obey,” or “take up your cross and follow Me.”

It's a lot tidier than having to accept a naked Savior, tortured, bleeding, and dying on an ancient Roman instrument of death. It doesn't ask us to believe in crazy things like a divine man born of a virgin who later rises from the grave. But, I repeat: We don't get to make the rules, only God does. And we either believe in how God set things up, or we don't.

Last Sunday, as I spoke the words of the Eucharistic liturgy, "who made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world," it hit me *so hard*, to think how Jesus suffered and died for the *whole world*, and yet, how oblivious and thankless are most of the people on this planet.

I felt such grief and sorrow that Our Savior would make that supreme sacrifice for people like my cousin on Facebook, and a bunch of my other cousins, too—who could care less. I pray hard for their salvation. But Rick was somewhat cynical about whether the Facebook cousin was seeking the truth—as was Nicodemus—or just arguing with me. I answered, "Who knows? I'm always inspired by the example of Saint Paul. If God could convert Saul of Tarsus into St. Paul, He can convert *anybody*."

So, if you know people who don't believe in Jesus—and I'm sure you must—keep sharing the Good news, and keep praying for them. Jesus said we will be surprised at who's in heaven and who's not. I hope and pray that every person who does not know Jesus Christ will experience a life-changing encounter with Him before our Lord returns—which, of course, He could at any moment.

**Let us pray:** Heavenly Father, may we, like Nicodemus, continue to seek and be open to the truth of the Gospel by learning from Jesus. Make us ever grateful for His precious gift and sacrifice that won for us salvation, and, in Your mercy, bring all who do not know Christ into the reach of Your saving embrace. This we ask through the power of the Holy Spirit, in Jesus' Holy Name. *Amen.*

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\* Adapt. N. George Hacker, 20 March 2011, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.