



“RESCUE REMEDY”

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 3:14-21

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, March 10, 2024, Lent #4

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John 3:14-21

3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

3:16 "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.

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.

3:18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

3:19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

3:20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

3:21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God

Even people who know nothing about the Bible, know about John 3:16–For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only son, and whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life... It’s one of THOSE passages—a bumper sticker favorite, a verse most likely to show up on a sign at an NFL football game. The calling card of Christian exceptionalism

in modern times—the either/or that Christians either use to throw down the gauntlet toward non-believers or one that makes progressive Christians cringe.

So, four weeks into our time in the wilderness in our Lenten journey, and here it is. Staring us down. Daring us to deal with it. Presenting us again with the discomfort of spending time with this part of us.

All of us are made up of parts—and so is Grace Covenant. And so is God. The Trinity is the theological attempt to describe some of those parts of God’s Self: The creator, the redeemer, the sustainer—traditional language: Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

Internal Family Systems (IFS), is therapeutic theory and practice of contemporary psychology that unpacks how these parts function and how our mental health is impacted by how integrated our parts can be. Dr. Richard Schwartz is credited with articulating the granular details of IFS. He is going to assist us in getting on the same page about how IFS describes the human psyche.

(Play Dr. Richard Schwartz explains IFS video) (4 minutes)

If we apply IFS to this scripture passage, then we can first get curious about it instead of trying to make it go away. The goal is not to make the difficult parts go away, but to unburden these parts.

John’s Gospel was born in a traumatic time, a crisis of experience in the first century Jewish community. And it has taken on some destructive roles and extreme thoughts.

John’s Gospel trades a lot in dualistic/binary language. Light/dark, good/evil, eternal life/perish. And to our contemporary ear, the way this Gospel references “the Jews” is deeply problematic and dangerous given the violence and prevalence of anti-Semitism and the history of anti-Semitism. So, this part of the Christian psyche, born in trauma, has been untended and has taken on extreme thoughts and behaviors in very destructive ways. Let’s get curious about where it comes from in the development of Christianity.

(Image of Qumran Caves)

Light/dark; good/evil of Johannine Gospel has parallels to the materials discovered from the Qumran Caves material (the Dead Sea scrolls) discovered in caves in an area that we now refer to as the West Bank (what was the ancient settlement of Qumran) between 1946 and 1956—a set of ancient Jewish manuscripts from the Second Temple Period were

discovered in 1946 by some teenage Bedouin shepherds tending their flock. In the next ten years over 10 caves were discovered.

(Image of Dead Sea Scrolls papyrus)

...and between 800 and 900 ancient Jewish manuscripts were discovered. Many in Hebrew, some in Paleo-Hebrew, some were translations of Hebrew Scripture into Greek and some were in Aramaic, the language many in the Jewish community spoke (very probably including Jesus) between the 6th century BCE and 70 CE (after the Siege of Jerusalem).

The thematic and tonal connections between Qumran and the Gospel of John suggest that John's Gospel is an artifact of this diversity of First Century Judaism.

(take down picture of the papyrus)

So, breathe in what we know about this part of us: the Gospel of John was written by a Jewish Christian for a Jewish Christian community that was in conflict with its own community—conflict with the authorities of the synagogue system.

The Gospel refers to those synagogue authorities as “The Jews” and “The Pharisees”—these terms can trigger us these 2000 years later because of the “legacy burdens” we have inherited in multiple parts of our culture around anti-semitism and the violence of genocide and oppression of non-Christians.

We don't know where John was written exactly—Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, or somewhere in Palestine—any of these locations make sense given the diversity of their Jewish populations.

This Gospel was not written for 21st Century Christians or colonized Christians, or Christians with formal political and judicial powers.

It was written to 1st Century Jewish people who were in a crisis situation in their Jewish community because of their belief in Jesus. The struggle of the Johannine community was about belonging, it was about identity—and the strong language in John was spoken not from Christians to Jews, but from Jews to Jews. That is so very important for us to remember whenever we encounter this text. ESPECIALLY when we read the third chapter of John and we get to this loaded verse of John 3:16.

The Jewish community was not a monolith—just like Christians are not a monolith today—nor is any religious identity a monolith.

This Gospel was written from the margins, from those shunned, kicked out, blamed and shamed by some in their own community because of the ways they were interpreting Jewish scripture and how Jesus fit into Jewish scripture. This Gospel was written for a people struggling to find their footing, their identity as their social capital and their sense of belonging were unraveling and slipping away.

Maybe they were looking for a way to be rescued from the morass of these devastating fractures and traumas they were living through. They were looking for something inviolable to hold onto, some clarity that the religious authorities could not take from them in the midst of all the conflict.

We also hold along with this, the legacy burden of the 2000 years that have transpired since this Gospel was written down—and these same words, written from the margins, got extracted and appropriated and weaponized from the power centers of authoritarian, fascist, Imperial governmental authorities like Rome in the time of conquest, like the Third Reich in Germany.

The parts began to move in destructive, violent ways. And the consequences have been devastating to the human family.

If we also overlay IFS also onto our reception of the passage, then we need to get curious with our own parts.

This family system of GCPC—is made up of a lot of parts—those parts include all the layers of identity, trauma, and belief that each of us carries with us. And we live in a culture that is full of wounded and protector parts who are off the rails.

We see fracturing of family systems all around us these days—in our country as we gear up for another presidential election—and we look at the parts of our collective psyche who are driving our civic discussion, and their destructive tendencies—these things we have not dealt with as a system, as a culture, these ones stuck in the past, militaristic, either/or thinkers, partisan—these protectors, these wounded parts—they are running roughshod over us as a country.

We need some healthy integrated functioning adult parts to lead our country right now—and what we've got are two white men in their twilight years who can't seem to understand that their approaches to things do a lot of harm, that the country is languishing from decades of inadequate policies in health care, housing, education, immigration, racial justice, the environment, policing, criminal justice, and cultural healing.

We are a country that has been at perpetual war abroad and with each other for generations.

We're tired—and we are pushed more and more to the extreme parts of our collective trauma because we feel the vulnerability of our dysfunctional political parents not being able to really take care of things.

It's a traumatizing realization when we realize that no one is coming to save us.

Sinking into the words of this passage in John when we are honest about the wounded and traumatized parts, the parts who were not parented like they needed to be, the parts left to fend for themselves, the parts left to fight their own battles for safety, for acknowledgement, for belonging—then maybe we can begin to befriend our own reactive parts that struggle to get past the triggering that happens when we go into the legacy burdens of our 2000 year old inter family spiritual conflict.

Today, here, in this place, at GCPC, we're trying to do something different with all of these parts, we are trying to get home by another way.

We're in this time of healing and reframing, practicing and leaning into doing hard things—and not everyone is up for it, not everyone believes they can do it, not everyone is willing to try trusting a new way of doing things.

We're experiencing it in our country, we are experiencing it in our community in Asheville around the reparations process, and we are experiencing it here at GCPC—the ways healthy boundaries have been allowed to persistently be crossed over and over again without accountability, without collective acknowledgment. We are living now in the legacy burden of the way harm has and has not been dealt with. We are being re-wounded by those old patterns and parts.

And it is hard for some people to understand why the leaders of this church are saying, it's time for us to try something new—to interrupt the old patterns and not get sucked into the old scripts. It's time for us to deal with the ways we are repeating the harmful patterns of our past—it's time for us to get curious with the parts who have been doing too much and not enough at the same time, the parts who have been too prominent and the parts that have been silenced and locked away.

It's time for us to practice accountability within our own church family and it's time for us to practice accountability with our Presbyterian family system, in particular the presbytery of Western North Carolina, the governing body of this region.

We're not keeping secrets anymore, GCPC. We're not cowering because we are afraid of who might get upset when we try to get healthy.

Not all parts are up for it—they are scared, they are activated, they are enraged, they are embarrassed, they are weary.

If you are a part of any healing journey in your own life, you know that when you get healthy there will always be people who don't like it and some relationships are never the same. When we change, the people around us have to change whether they want to or not.

It is hard work and it is painful. Here we are, so deep into these wilderness days that we are starting to look around for ways to make it all stop. Who will come to rescue us from ourselves? Who will make us feel like everything is going to be okay?

If we can keep coming back to the present moment—to the healthy support that is here, to the breath that we share and the ground that we stand on together, then we can feel our feet on the sacred ground that steadies us in the tumult and the turbulence.

We are doing it, Grace Covenant. We are doing the work of getting healthier, of getting curious with the parts that have had too much sway, we are doing the work of getting clear with who we are and how we want to move forward, of getting confident that we can do this transformative, liberating work, and that God will provide for us.

God has created the conditions for us to flourish, Grace Covenant. And that kind of rescue remedy is ours to tend and nourish. Accountability is compassionate, healthy boundaries are courageous, truth telling is curiosity making us well, and allowing hard things to strengthen our vitality is creating beloved community.

Grace Covenant is getting stronger and healthier by doing some long overdue hard work to be honest about harm and about what is required for the health of our community.

Jesus is inviting us in Lent 2024 to come out into the wide open space of wilderness with all the parts—to allow them to find their way back to their natural talents and resources. To transform through unburdening, to find ways to be well together by stopping the harm and practicing health by forging a newly integrated way of being together. The battle is not

against people –all people are beloved children of God. The challenge is to address the unhealthy patterns and the harm by bringing the destructive behaviors into the light.

The either/or that the Johannine community may have needed at the time was a survival skill. We don't need that today. But we do need Jesus—the part of the Divine Self that came with perfect compassion and moral courage and theological curiosity—the one who gave his life for the cause of justice and love for all. The one who invites us to be well with ourselves and with God.

Thanks be to God.