

Joy: The World is in God's Hand  
John 3:16  
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In the children's time, Phil reminded us in a tangible and beautifully artistic way of the Joy we share in knowing God has the world in God's hand. This Advent we've been focusing on the theme, "Joy to the World," looking at it from different perspectives. Starting two weeks ago, we looked at joy in our personal and family world. Last week, joy in our church world. This week, we are going to combine joy in our community and global world using a Christmas song in the sermon and next week will be celebrating joy to the world through Christmas carols from around the globe. In the lighting of the Advent wreath candles we've been hearing John 3:16 in different languages. This verse is the basis of the angel's good news of great joy. Like the song God's Got the Whole World in God's Hands, this is a familiar verse that many of us memorized as children. Even though it is familiar, in view of our contemporary world context, perhaps the time has come to look at it less familiar ways. [Usher press play starting out quietly:]

John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten Son that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Prayer: Let us pray: Thank you God for this word, a word of your love for the world. We pray we may have open minds and hearts to perhaps see it differently today. Amen.

**Some children see Him lily white,  
the baby Jesus born this night.  
Some children see Him lily white,  
with tresses soft and fair.  
Some children see Him bronzed and brown,  
The Lord of heav'n to earth come down.  
Some children see Him bronzed and brown,  
with dark and heavy hair.**

**Some children see Him almond-eyed,  
this Savior whom we kneel beside.  
some children see Him almond-eyed,  
with skin of golden hue.  
Some children see Him dark as they,  
sweet Mary's Son to whom we pray.  
Some children see him dark as they,  
and, oh! they love Him, too!**

This simple song illustrates for us one aspect of the complexity of the verse; For God so loved the world... “lily white, bronzed and brown, almond eyed, dark as they”...all around the world Christians respond to the gift of love...to “Emmanuel, God with us,” and we each respond from our own perspective and experience. We are then challenged to deepen our love for God and our understanding of others God loves by learning about them and sharing their experiences. This fall here at Covenant we’ve had an adult education course on Black Theology and Black Power. This important course raised awareness and discussed the issues, concerns and experiences of African Americans and who Christ is for them. A couple of years ago, the focus on a Sunday morning was to promote the improvement of education in our Madison schools for African Americans, on the way out a white teenage boy challenged us with one simple sentence by saying, “what about the Latinos?” That teenage boy was not concerned about himself but for others. That’s the challenge the song raises...the challenge that continues.

For the last seventeen hundred years since Constantine made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire, the prominent worldview of Christ has been from a western predominately male perspective. In our changing world, our challenge in receiving and sharing the joy to the world that God gave the Son, is to open our hearts and minds to Black Theology and the Black Christ, and Latin American Theology and the Latin American Christ, Asian Theology and the Asian Christ, Native American Theology and the Native American Christ, Feminist theology...you get the point. At the same time we must hold the challenge that just because the western male perspective has been the dominant one doesn’t mean it too isn’t to be valued. Emmanuel, God with us...whoever we may be. The good news of great joy for all people...not one experience, whether it’s Caucasian or Black or Latino or Asian or whatever, but with ongoing attempts to understand the complexity and consequences that the world God loves is not just “our own little world”...whatever that world perspective may be, but the whole world!

That’s the first challenge that we here from John 3:16 today. The second one may be even harder for it calls us to broaden our perspective even more. We’ve been talking about the Christian world...but the world is changing. As I’ve already reminded you since early in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity has been the worldwide dominant religion. But if the predictions are true this will no longer be the case in thirty years, in the lifetime of at least half of those in this sanctuary today. At that point, in 2040 Islam will be the world’s largest religion. What will our experience as Christians be then? Will we have radio stations playing all Christmas music all the time during this Christian season? I couldn’t help thinking about this when I was at the Christmas Spectacular at the Overture Center last weekend. That wonderful Christian and Christmas celebration was rich in musical variety sharing sacred and secular songs. As I was getting caught up in the enjoyment of it, I found myself worrying; this isn’t “PC” [politically correct,] then I reminded myself that people were there by their own choice, they knew what it was. I relaxed, enjoyed the rest of the concert, but was reminded of it again at the end when final bows were taken, five of the six on stage had on Santa hats, while one had on a hat that was a Menorah!

How are we to view John 3:16 in a larger religious world context? We know this verse has been used for the conversion of people to the Christian faith; sometimes effectively, sometimes not. For example, how many of you have seen one of these at a sporting event? [Hold up John 3:16 poster board.] For God so loved the world...not just the Christian world, but the whole world.

The Greek word for world is cosmos...everything...the universe! As Christians we hold to the joy of knowing God's love in Christ, And to the possibility, that God's love for the world in sending Christ, the Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, God with us, is deeper, higher, and wider than our experience as Christians! Does this mean we abandon our Christian faith? Absolutely not, quite the contrary, it means that we embrace it all the more, knowing and believing with all our heart that God who loves us, loves the whole world as well! Perhaps the most we can say about John 3:16 is that we cannot comprehend its complexities or begin to understand the mysterious love of God. What we know is God so loved the world...and the world is in God's hand. For us, as Christians, from the Crèche to the Cross to the power of the Resurrection we see God's love in Christ...each from our own perspective, trying to understand others' experiences, lily white, bronze and brown, almond eyed, dark as they...and oh, we all love him so! And welling up from that love is joy...joy we want to share, at Christmas time and always...Joy to the world... the whole world God loves...Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Amen.