

***Really Safe***  
**by Durrell Watkins , MA, MDiv**  
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**John 3.17**

My great-aunt Gladys went on a vacation one year and enjoyed a bit of snorkeling. After about an hour in the water, everyone got back into the boat except my great-aunt and one young man. She thought, "Well, as long as he stays in the water, I may as well."

She then noticed that everywhere she went, he followed. She was starting to be very flattered, and finally thought she may as well strike up a conversation. So she got back into the boat, as did he. And as she was taking off her fins, she said, "Young man, why were you following me around with so much interest?" The young man said, "because I'm the lifeguard." She didn't get a date, but at least she was safe.

John's gospel is more difficult than the others for me. Not only is it removed by some 6 decades from the actual life of Jesus, it relies on poetic license, allegory, philosophy, and symbolism more than the others. If we take John literally, then it seems to contradict the other gospels, but taking any scripture seriously rather than literally takes a lot of time and mental energy. And frankly, that sort of critical thinking hasn't traditionally been encouraged in most churches.

But, the gospel did make it into our canon of scripture, and like anything else that seems problematic, ignoring it doesn't make it not be there. So, now and again, we must summon our courage and face the gospel and mine it for whatever golden nuggets it has to offer; and of course, as with most human enterprises, the gospel does have some hope and empowerment to share with us. Still, I'll be glad to get back to Mark in several weeks.

The anonymous writer begins what we call the gospel of John with a hymn that offers a very spiritualized image of Christ. He takes the Wisdom tradition of Judaism, where the Wisdom of God is personified and thought to be a sort of companion of God's, and he takes the Logos tradition from Greek philosophy and he not only merges those traditions but he also includes Jesus in his hybrid philosophy.

So, while Matthew, Mark, and Luke are interested in telling stories about Jesus' life that will suggest that his life had significance for the very unfolding of human history, the writer of John's gospel is more interested in painting Jesus as a celestial, perhaps even divine figure.

His argument isn't that there was a prophet who fulfilled messianic promises in unsuspected ways and who somehow lives beyond his moment of execution; though he doesn't dispute any of that, of course, but his focus is more on the metaphysics of Jesus' life, character, and nature.

In the other gospels, we see Jesus growing, almost reluctantly, into his role as a reformer, leader, healer, and champion of the oppressed. In John's gospel, Jesus seems to be fully aware of his role in human history and is willing to affirm it with a certainty that borders on arrogance. John's Jesus is an ascended, cosmic, celestial, ubiquitous figure that is fully aware of who and what he is from the beginning.

I prefer the more humble and accessible Jesus that we find in the earlier gospels. The Jesus who must have his own prejudices pointed out to him so that he can overcome them and be present to even more people...Mark and Matthew show us such a Jesus when a woman comes to Jesus for the healing of her daughter and he makes an ethnic slur and tries to dismiss the woman.

The woman helps Jesus see that he has bought into some unhelpful stereotypes, and we then get to see Jesus grow right in front of us.

Of course we love that Jesus. A Jesus who has had to heal his own issues has the authority then to help me with mine!

But John's writer is in another time, writing to a different audience, and he has his own agenda. He wants to paint Jesus as a self-actualized, fully aware, all-wise, all-knowing heavenly hero just hanging out on earth for a brief adventure.

But John is clear, in chapter 1, verse 14: "The Logos became flesh and pitched a tent among us." This cosmic figure is also, somehow, one of us. And that may be where we can discover John's genius. Yes, Jesus is super special, but he's also one of us. He's like us; which may imply that we are at least potentially like him.

It's a nuanced, philosophical, high minded approach...not as clear, not as simple, not as easy to catch as the earlier gospels, but for those who can hear it, it is amazingly empowering.

God's wisdom, God's love, God's presence...made a dwelling among us, perhaps within us. Maybe all that we are painting this Jesus to be is also what we are; or at least what we are meant to be.

Maybe when Jesus says, "I thank you God for hearing me; I know that you always hear me" (John 11.41-42), that is meant to teach us how to pray...affirmatively, with gratitude and expectation... Thank You God for Hearing Me! I know that You ALWAYS hear me!!!

When John's Jesus says, "I am the way..." perhaps we are to follow his example, and know that affirming our sacred value is the way to know it, to experience it, and to live in its power.

When John's Jesus says, "I am the truth," maybe we are to know that living our truth, even when it is unpopular, or even dangerous, but being true to who we know ourselves to be is the only way to live with authenticity; we can't know God unless we are willing to know who it is that is doing the knowing...we must know us before we can know the one in whose image we are made. We must know the truth of our loveable-ness before we will trust that God's love truly includes us, just as we are.

When John's Jesus says, "I am the life..." maybe we are meant to look at his life of courage, of compassion, of radical honesty, of caring for others, of speaking truth to power and know that such a life is the life that has real meaning.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to God except through me" (John 14.6) isn't a self-serving instruction to bash, insult, or convert people of different religions; it isn't to say that God can only love people who hold a certain opinion about Jesus; it is modeling for us that we must find our way, own our truth, and live the life of integrity that Jesus modeled...that's the way to live in full communion with the divine and that way is open to Christians and non-Christians alike, in every age and in every place. Wow...John is starting to grow on me.

So, with this insight into John, listen first to what he says in chapter 3, verse 14: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Humanity be lifted up." Even while making Jesus a divine sort of figure, John keeps the Son of Humanity phrase that Mark borrows from Daniel. The Son of Humans, the Human One: that may be an excellent clue for us.

We are never so divine as when we are fully human. When we care for others, when we are generous, when we honor our minds, our bodies, our relationships, our neighbors, our planet...when we see a divine spark in ourselves and in others, even in those we consider our enemies...we are becoming shining examples of what humans are really capable of; and like the one that some called the Son of Humanity, the Example of what humans can be, we may find that when we express our best human qualities we are actually becoming channels for the redeeming love of God, channels through which that love can flow and heal our world.

Of course, not only is John giving us this Son of Humanity image, he is also reinterpreting a passage from the book of Numbers.

In Numbers 21, people have been bitten by snakes (a painful experience to be sure), and the cure was for Moses to lift a bronze serpent up in the air. People who saw the magical talisman were cured from their snake venom poisoning. John uses that story as an archetype for what followers of Jesus have been going through.

Jesus was killed; 40 years later the Temple was destroyed...30 more years go by and John's gospel is finally written. Times have been hard for this new movement on the margins.

But if we face what we are afraid of; if we face the pain, if we face the discomfort, we can find hope either in the midst of it or just beyond it.

Lift up the snake to survive the snake bite.

Lift up the executed Son of Humanity to discover that we, too, can be fully human and fully in communion with the divine.

His spirit and his example live on and we can lift it up, look to it, and we may find that we, too, can survive the ordeals at hand!

For you see, God did not send this Son of Humanity into the world to condemn it...but that through his example the world might find safety. That doesn't mean Golgotha doesn't happen...but it does mean that Golgotha doesn't get the last word.

People who can live with that mind set always have hope, always have power, always have dignity, always have the assurance that God is with them and will remain with them for all eternity.

God's loving presence has pitched a tent within us, so that our prayers are always heard. Knowing this is the way and the truth and the life that leads to communion with the divine that no circumstance can take away; and for people facing any difficulty, this is the Good news. Amen.

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**God is not condemning me.  
God is not rejecting me.  
God's love lives in me.  
God's love is holding me.  
God's love is comforting me.  
In God, I am really safe.  
And so it is!  
Amen.**

"There are no extra pieces in the universe. Everyone is here because he or she has a place to fill..."  
Deepak Chopra