



The Promise of Eternal Life

John 3:14-21

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

March 14, 2021

For God so loved the world... John 3:16 might be the most famous verse in the entire Bible. Even folks who can't quote it, recognize it. It shows up on signs and posters at football games and parades and other public gatherings — or at least, it did.

It has been almost exactly one year since our world shut down. Last year on this same weekend, you stayed home instead of going to Montreat, and the doors of the Sanctuary stayed closed while worship went online for the first time.

So much, and so little, has changed in one year, a year in which every day was never-ending and every month somehow flew by. I don't know about you, but I am astonished and grateful for our resilience and creativity and flexibility. And, at the very same time, I am exhausted and overwhelmed by the grief and isolation and the almost constant need to adjust and adapt. I assume many of you feel the same, when you stop and think about it. This year has held both joy and sorrow in ways that feel incredibly amplified.

So I think it is an especially good week to remember God's promise of eternal life. To start out, I want us to think about what eternal life means. Taken at its most literal level, "eternal life" would be "life that goes on forever," wouldn't it? We need to be careful about that literal interpretation, though, because this passage we're reading today picks

up in the middle of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a leader among the Jews who asks Jesus some reasonable questions but then gets lost in translation. Jesus tells him he'll have to be born again, and poor Nick can't see past the literal. "How can someone be born again?" he asks, and he almost misses the point Jesus is trying to make. We do well to keep this in mind as we consider the second half of their conversation.

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.

If "eternal life" is simply "life that goes on forever," I honestly don't see any good news there. You've seen the movie *Groundhog Day*, right? Bill Murray plays a man who literally lives the same day over and over and over again. He is stuck on repeat and he is miserable. To watch the movie is to spend the whole time rooting for him to get out — to do whatever it takes to break the cycle. Some of our pandemic days and weeks have felt eerily similar, haven't they? And we're desperate for it to come to an end.

God's promise of eternal life is nothing like that. Eternal life is not just life that goes on forever. Eternal life is life transformed.

Perhaps this will help. We as a community are grieving the death of our own Elizabeth Grimball, who died earlier this week. If we could have, we would have held on to her forever. Thirty-one years is just not enough

time. I believe with every fiber of my being that Elizabeth, who had an enormous spirit but also had to endure an enormous battle, is experiencing eternal life now. But I do not believe that means she is exactly the way we last saw her, forevermore. I believe that means she is now exactly the way God hopes and intends for us all eventually: healthy, and whole, and no longer held back by anything of this earth.

An eternity of life as we are right now — well, okay, but that would be ambivalent news at best. And for all sorts of people for all sorts of reasons, that would be downright terrible news. An eternity of life that has been transformed — **that** is the good news of Jesus Christ. **That** is the promise. That when we are welcomed into the kingdom of heaven, when we are received into the house with many rooms, when we are embraced by the loving arms of God, everything about us will reflect the goodness God intended for all of us since creation began. There will be no more weeping and no more sorrow and no more sighing, for death in all its forms will have lost its sting forever.

That is, I believe, exactly one-half of what Jesus is taking about when he says to Nicodemus, *everyone who believes in [him] will not perish, but have eternal life*. Because eternal life is about what happens to us after we die. And, at the very same time, eternal life can be about what happens to us while we are still living. Especially when John is the one telling us the story, Jesus never misses a chance to remind us: what is possible and real and true after we die is also possible and real and true while we are alive, too. Maybe not in its ultimate fullness, but enough that it is worth paying attention.

Theologians call this realized eschatology. The idea that everything God promises about “the end” be it the end of the world or the end of our days in the world can also be realized in the present. In other words,

eternal life is both in the future, and right now. At least if we understand it the right way.

Anne Lamott, in her newest book *Dusk, Night, Dawn*, tells the story of her friend's daughter, Ali. Ali ended up in prison after driving while intoxicated and hitting a pedestrian. She was in her thirties when she began serving her sentence, and for the first several months, she was nearly catatonic with grief and fear and shame. But another woman, one serving a life sentence, came alongside Ali. She kept an eye out for her, gave her books to read, and took her to AA meetings. Ali went along with it only because it got her out of her cell for a few hours each week. She was only a social drinker, she insisted. It took more than a year, but Ali finally realized she was not a victim of bad luck; she was an alcoholic, and she was responsible for her own actions when she got behind the wheel of that car.

Fast forward another year, a full year of sobriety, and Ali and her friend were part of the Environmental Conservation Work Program run by the Department of Corrections. Anne writes, “Ali made a few dollars a week. It wasn't great money. But you know what it bought her over time? It bought her herself. And a skill. And a purpose: to save other lives. She couldn't bring back what she had taken from the victim's family, or even her own family, but she could still be a helper in the world.”

And just recently, Anne says, Ali and her crew of fellow inmates were cleaning up fallen branches after a nearby river overflowed, and she found a baby coyote among all the debris. She picked it up and brought it to show the others, and the chief shouted out for everyone to hear, “Look what Ali Baba found! Ali Baba saved a baby coyote!” Anne writes, “How is it possible to go from being convict D53789 to Ali Baba, from a number to a nickname? How is it possible to go from maximum shame and cowardice to protector of a baby animal and her own sober self, convinced that both are worthy of being saved?”

How is it possible? It's possible because God so loves the world, that God promises us eternal life — not life forever stuck on repeat, but life transformed, life made new, life redeemed.

Eternal life is the answer Jesus offers when Nicodemus asks his own version of that same question: how is possible to be born again? How is it possible that all these things could be true?

The promise of eternal life, in the future, means when we die to this earthly life, we receive a new heavenly life. The promise of eternal life, right now, means when we die to an old way of living, we can embrace a new way of living. And it is possible, all of it, because God so loves the world. Everything that is of God, everything that comes from God, is always rooted in love, and God's love can make provision for our future and our right now at the very same time.

It is in that spirit of love that move us toward more than one thing at a time that I wonder, as this pandemic season eventually draws to a close, if the church itself might be on the cusp of transformation, of being born again. It was John Calvin, the old Reformer, who said "The church lives by a thousand resurrections."

It has been a year. It has been a heavy year, but the first streaks of a new day dawning are creeping closer. And we will have some choices to make soon. It will be tempting for us to revert back immediately to everything the way that it was 53 weeks ago. And some of that will be healing and healthy. Some of that will help make us whole again. But I wonder if we do that mindlessly, automatically, without discernment, without being as innocent as doves and as wise as serpents, I wonder if we might run the risk of missing an opportunity to be transformed.

Now, don't get me wrong. Just as we ought not rush in too fast, neither should we toss out too much. The question to ask is not,

What should change just for the sake of change? The question to ask is, What should change for the sake of the Gospel?

You might think what I'm about to say sounds a little silly, but stick with me. You want a sign of transformation, Shandon? There are video cameras being installed, permanently, in our sanctuary. Now, if you have spent more than five minutes around Presbyterians of any sort, you know as well as I do that typically, a decision to install any sort of technology in any Sanctuary would take ages and studies and surveys and probably listening sessions and who knows what else for who knows how long. I actually do know, sort of, because I have walked through this decision in previous churches. Lord have mercy! We needed the Lord's mercy at some of the Session meetings where those things were debated. And I understand cameras had been talked about here at Shandon in the past with both ardent supporters and passionate detractors.

But the conversation around cameras, once we got our feet under us in this pandemic? The way forward was crystal clear to everyone. Yes, we need cameras. We need to make sure that all of our people can worship wherever they are. We have been changed by our experience, and we know now: Worship ought not be a privilege reserved for the able-bodied or the healthy-enough or those whose work schedule happens to align with ours. Worship is for everyone, and we have the capacity to make it so. Yes, **of course** we will put cameras in the Sanctuary.

Maybe it sounds silly, but I believe it was a sign of transformation. And I believe — I hope and I pray — it will not be the only one. Because the only thing worse than being apart from one another for a year would be to miss the opportunities this year apart still has to offer us.