

“Exposed”

Genesis 12:1-4; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

March 14, 2021

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.”*

I have to confess; I have a slightly philosophical bent. I am oftentimes quite drawn into pondering what are likely to be difficult or perhaps even unanswerable questions. In fact, that drive likely played a large role in my desire to become a pastor. I also am a child of the 70s which meant that along the line, I got exposed to some great music. One of my favorite bands was the Talking Heads, in their song, “Letting the Days Go By,” they ask the biggest question of all – “And you may ask yourself, how did I get here?” And, again, someday you’ll see how grateful you should be that I didn’t sing that. Don’t believe me? Ask my kids.

Now listen, you can be rather literal with this question. How did I get here? Well, I drove here to the church this morning, that’s how I got here. That’s an answer, to be sure, but not one which wrestle with the question very strenuously. I may have driven myself to get to the church this morning, but I didn’t create myself and history shows pretty clearly that if it weren’t for the intervention of God in my life and yours, that none of us would be here even to ponder the query. No, I want to know, “How did I get here?”, a married pastor of a church? How am I Jason Bryant living on this third rock from the sun in 21st century in the first place? And how are you, you? How do you and I get to be here, at Cook’s Memorial Presbyterian Church on this fourth Sunday in Lent?

Well, the child in me wants here to quote Bugs Bunny, that you and I arrived here as the consequence of that left turn, we took at Albuquerque. I admit that’s probably a little too old a reference to use any longer and expect people to track you but I do want to state a fact I believe is not only Biblically true, but also one that scientists are warming up to again and again – that we are here because of a design. A plan. One that could only have been imagined, let alone created, by a being of inordinate power.

John 3:16 begins to answer the question of how did I get here, of course. It begins quite simply, “For God...”

Here, God serves as the architect, designer, builder and sustainer of everything we’ll ever encounter, including ourselves.

This knowledge or awareness of ONE all-powerful force of course even predates the arrival of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Plato and Aristotle and Plotinus all worked with the fundamental assumption of what was called, The Prime Mover. Looking at the world and determining that everything that is created by something else, these ancient philosophers saw what is undoubtedly true. Take for example you and I. We were created, in a fashion, by our parents. And it isn’t just humans, everything has a cause – a rock, a tree, a planet in the heavens. Something had to happen. Something had to act to bring it into being.

Consequently, it was here that the Great Chain of Being was articulated. Best image for that I ever heard was a champagne waterfall. Do you know what those are? Well, they’re stacks of champagne flutes stacked together in a pyramid like fashion. Then, the master of festivities gets up and pours a huge bottle of bubbly right there into the top glass. The champagne then gushes downward, filling all those other cups. Well, someone has to pour the champagne and that is conceived to be God.

But even beyond that, God is the one who made the bubbly, arranged the glasses and keeps pouring that stuff so that everything is progressing according to plan. That’s the image that many philosophers from antiquity believed.

And it makes sense, something must have started this thing called life. But what was largely left unarticulated is why? Why would whatever this prime mover is move initially in the first place? What were its motivations, its goals? Or was it just a power without personality, fated simply to serve in such a capacity?

See, that’s not a very helpful or hopeful answer to our question. “How did we get here?” becomes reduced to randomness. And believe me, we live in an age where that’s getting to be more and more the preferred answer. We are here for no reason whatsoever with no real purpose behind anything.

It's terribly depressing. It's the reason that few people actually ever read atheists works because the end result of their words simply don't harmonize with our souls. We know that there's a deeper cause, a prime mover if you will.

No, certainly there was something, some power which designed all of this. Some force which created the universe and set us within it. And, whatever that God is, He was omnipotent.

Ah, but you see, omnipotence is a rather frightening concept, isn't it? That there would be some power that could create us and destroy us with a simple word is a terrifying thing. The Book of Job gets at this rather nicely. I read to you Job 26:7-14 – *“He stretches out the north over the void and hangs the earth on nothing. He binds up the waters in his thick clouds, and the cloud is not split open under them. He covers the face of the full moon and spreads over it his cloud. He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness. The pillars of heaven tremble and are astounded at his rebuke. By his power he stilled the sea; by his understanding he shattered Rahab. By his wind the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent. Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?”*

Ah, there's a big question – “But the thunder of His power, who can understand?”

Thankfully again, John 3:16 provides us the way – “For God SO LOVED the WORLD.”

It isn't the case that this Prime Mover set everything into motion simply because he could. After all, if I learned anything from my parents it was this – just because you can do something, it doesn't necessarily mean that you should.” Put another way, just because God could've created everything, doesn't mean he would have. Love here in John 3:16 gives us an answer. God created us all because He loves us.

I think of it like this – have you ever needed to call for customer service? Perhaps your internet goes down or you need to talk with someone about your health benefits? Well, when you do, you dial the number and hope for the best. I once heard a man describe his strategy for getting the best help. He noted that there were three types of people. First, the kind that wants to help you but just doesn't know enough to do so. The second is the person who can help you but, for some reason or another, doesn't want to. The third type is the one he calls for – the one who wants to help you and holds the knowledge and ability to do so. When you meet those people, man, issues get resolved quickly, don't they?

Well, in God's love we find not only the rationale for why we are here, “He loves us,” but also the goal of our existence – that we would love him.

Now look, that doesn't mean that God created us because He needs us. After all, the very idea of omnipotence means that nothing is lacking. No, God doesn't need us to love him.

In his work, “The Problem with Pain,” Christian thinker CS Lewis gets us at an important point – *“If the immutable heart can be grieved by the puppets of its own making, it is Divine Omnipotence, no other, that has subjected it, freely, and in a humility that passes understanding. If the world exists not chiefly that we may love God, but that God may love us, yet that very fact, on a deeper level, is so for our sakes. If He who in Himself can lack nothing chooses to need us, it is because we need to be needed.”*

We are here because God loves us.

But how do we know that? Love, after all, is a rather elusive thing. I mean, it's easy to say the words, much tougher to do the deal, so to speak.

John 3:16 gets us directly into how we know that we are loved by God. We know this because “For God so loved the world, that HE gave his only Son.

God the Father, in His love allowed His only Son to take flesh and become Emmanuel, God with us. Love is nothing if not sacrifice, and the Father shows that He's willing to do that.

One of the many great aspects of my role as a pastor is to work with couples preparing to be married. One of the first questions that I ask is “What does love mean to you?” I told you I liked deep questions, right? I've gotten a bunch of different answers through the years from the inspiring to the shocking, really. That's one of the things people waiting to get married don't always quite get, not in its fullness, at least. Love isn't only that giddy feeling we get when we fall in love. It's more the ability to work arduously on another's behalf without regard for your own immediate needs.

As I've likely already told y'all, I am a big history fan and, in particular, enjoy reading about World War II. After the tv miniseries, Band of Brothers, I went back and read Stephen Ambrose's book upon which it was

based. Telling the story of a company of paratroopers from boot camp into and through WWII, Band of Brothers talks a lot about love, in an indirect way. In the beginning of the work, Ambrose quotes one of the men who talks about getting to the point where he loved his troopmates so much that it became reflex to put his own life in danger to help one of his comrades.

The Gospel of John tells us something similar, doesn't it? **John 15:13 – “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”** Which, we can't lose sight of, is exactly what Jesus does for us.

During the season of Lent, we remember that this redemption we've received wasn't without a cost, just one we didn't have to pay. Jesus Christ, came into the world in order to reconcile us back to God the father. In order to do this, our transgressions needed to be atoned for. As Jesus is lifted up on the Cross, we see the truest example of love the world has ever seen.

For while suffering and dying for one other person is astounding, how about suffering and dying for every human being that ever existed? That would take a depth of love which is truly beyond our ability to understand. We can appreciate it though, that's for sure. Take for example a work of art like from Jackson Pollack. I have no idea what it's about, but I know it's art. Same with love, I may not understand how Jesus was able to do what He did on the Cross, but I am, by God's grace, able to deeply, truly appreciate it.

John 3:16 has thusly provided us an answer to why you and I are here. We're here on earth because God loves us. And the reason we're here on a Sunday morning are here or watching online is the same. Because God loves us, we believe. And, in that believing, have come to worship Him who loves us.

Our belief well, maybe that's something we conjure up on our own. Well, we'd be wrong. Paul, in Ephesians 2 gets at this:

“God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace, you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

We believe because God loves us first and we are here, in this sanctuary or sitting in front of a screen entirely because God chose in his omnipotent love to act. And because God's given us the faith to believe in Jesus, we know we have nothing to fear in the undiscovered country which lies beyond our graves.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

You see, God's magnificent love can't be exhausted in one mere human life time. That'd be the cosmic equivalent of me attempting to squeezing into a pair of 32" waist skinny jeans. It simply can't be done. As such, God through Christ enables us not only to live abundantly here but eternally in the hereafter.

And that's some good news.

Why are we here?

We're here because God loves us and, in that love, He gives everything to us, even our meaning. Because we are here, together, gathered and assembled. You see, God's Word describes the church as the body of Christ on Earth. As such, we are to love the world as Jesus Christ taught us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Scripture and Quotes

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