

Psalm 107:1-3. 17-22

“Give thanks to the Lord because he is good,
because his faithful love lasts forever!”

2 That’s what those who are redeemed by the Lord say,
the ones God redeemed from the power of their enemies,

3 the ones God gathered from various countries,
from east and west, north and south.

17 Some of the redeemed were fools because of their sinful ways.
They suffered because of their wickedness.

18 They had absolutely no appetite for food;
they had arrived at death’s gates.

19 So they cried out to the Lord in their distress,
and God saved them from their desperate circumstances.

20 God gave the order and healed them;
he rescued them from their pit.

21 Let them thank the Lord for his faithful love
and his wondrous works for all people.

22 Let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices
and declare what God has done in songs of joy!

John 3:14-21

14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One[d] be lifted up
15 so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. 16 God so loved the world that he
gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life.

17 God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved
through him. 18 Whoever believes in him isn’t judged; whoever doesn’t believe in him is already
judged, because they don’t believe in the name of God’s only Son.

19 “This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness
more than the light, for their actions are evil. 20 All who do wicked things hate the light and don’t
come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. 21 Whoever does the
truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God.”

Sermon

Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise. Lord open our hearts and our lives will sing out your name. Amen.

- If you're looking for a good sermon on John 3:16, you're looking in the wrong place. Instead, we're going to talk about science fiction and what it means to live in the light instead of the shadows.
 - Our God is the God of Science Fiction, where fantasy becomes reality.
- There's a great little book out there called *Theology and Science Fiction* by James McGrath.
 - Basically argues that theology and scifi dovetail nicely because they're meant to introduce us to the possibilities beyond ourselves and our earth, push the boundaries of what we accept as true, good, and beautiful, and challenge us that the "alien" is, in fact, of equal integrity.
 - When we fall in love with the shadows, things like science fiction become beacons that point our perspective outside of ourselves.
 - The whole snake on a stick thing referenced in verse 14 seems a bit like sci fi to me. It references a story in *The Book of Numbers* where the people complain that God isn't good

enough - that deliverance from slavery in Egypt wasn't good enough - so God sends poisonous snakes among them as punishment. Then they cry out to God for assistance, so God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent, hold it up on a pole so people could see it, and that would heal them. What kind of Crocodile Dundee meets Star Wars solution is that? The healing for snake bites? Snake on a stick!

- Of course, John connects this image with Jesus's crucifixion, that the healing of our death comes from the lifting up of Christ's death for all to see. It's something beyond our comprehension, and yet it forces us to look away from ourselves and to the work of God beyond ourselves.
- The God who heals through the illness.
 - Snake/Cross
 - The sci-fi aspect of this is actually integral to God's approach to the world. God doesn't throw antiseptic into the wound. Instead, turns the wound into the agent of healing itself. What is perhaps Rumi's most famous line of poetry - The wound is where the light enters you - captures something of that truth.

As we children of Abraham look to God, our Muslim sibling Rumi notices that God intends to dive into the need for healing rather than work through our more medical methods, and that the medicine for our immortality comes through the very mortal experiences of pain, of suffering, and even of death.

- The God who responds to our cries.
 - A common trope in science fiction is the unresponsive, oppressive leadership that doesn't respond to the cries of the common people.
 - Sometimes, it appears that way, like in Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith. Chancellor Palpatine takes on additional, "emergency" powers in the Senate, becoming an unchallengeable Emperor, supposedly in response to the needs of the people, but instead limits or removes most of their autonomy. Padme Amidala's most poignant reflection sums up those anti-Christ powers: "So this is how liberty dies, with thunderous applause."

- What we see from God today, though, is a different kind of leadership, for God hears the cries and addresses the problems, though perhaps in unorthodox ways. The psalmist declares, “they cried out to the Lord in their distress, and God saved them from their desperate circumstances. God gave the order and healed them; he rescued them from their pit.”
- The God whose judgement is salvation.
 - In John 3, I think the most informative verse isn't John 3:16, but John 3:17: “God didn't send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through the Son.” Now, the linguistics here are interesting. Judgement isn't itself a negative term, though John seems to frame it that way. What judgement seems to entail, though, is the possibility for condemnation. In fact, that's why some translators render this “condemn” rather than “judge.”
 - And that's the key: The presence of God's light in the world always intends salvation, always intends healing, always intends health and wellness and wholeness. God's judgement for the world is salvation. I'm forever enchanted by

C.S. Lewis's depiction of heaven and hell in *The Great Divorce*, where hell is simply those parts of heaven where people are too focused on themselves to notice God's goodness.

- So what does this have to do with our reforming, evolving faith?
 - These are different reflections, different lights through the prism, of God's redeeming work. It's the midsemester reminder that, for all the work on reforming ourselves and evolving into the people we want to be, that God's the one at work redeeming us in the first place. It's the realization that the light is already present in our wound, so that we're not condemned forever to our suffering. We do work, but our work is not for our salvation. That's God's work, and in the most sci-fi kind of way, it's work that's already done even as we still live with our imperfections.
 - "If you will, you can become all flame."