

March 5, 2023
John 3:1-17
Keeping Our Heads Up
Michael Stanfield

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ “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. ¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Words of God for the people of God. *Let us pray. Gracious God, Bless us as we come to your word that we may approach it with fresh eyes open hearts and willing spirits. In Christ’s name we pray, amen.*



Good news. That seemed to me to be the message of this year’s True/False festival. In spite of government corruption, racism, bigotry and tyranny, there are brave people with integrity in the world making great sacrifices in an effort to do the right thing - and they are making a difference.

Good news. We all could use some. And fortunately, the real message of today’s passage is just that – especially to the downhearted, the empty and the lifeless.

“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.” It is probably the most well-known, oft quoted passage in the entire Bible. Unfortunately, what that means in the U.S. is that it has been both

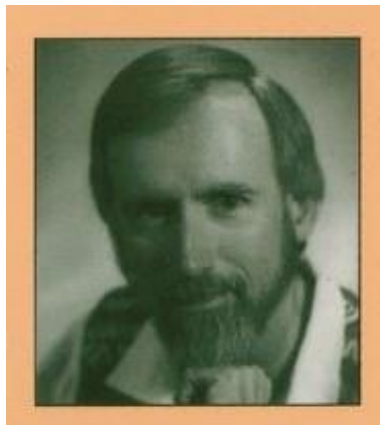
trivialized and misused to the point of its message having the opposite effect of its original intent. People who quote John 3:16 a lot tend to act as if John 3:17 doesn't exist.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

So John 3:16 gets delivered as a judgement behind home plate of Major League baseball games as if to say, you either believe in Jesus or you're going to Hell. How is that good news? It is the most distorted, warped use of the text imaginable. Because the passage is really this beautiful invitation – an invitation to lift up one's head in order to see somewhere over the rainbow – to get a glimpse of something wonderful that may have been missing from one's life.

It's unfortunate that some perhaps well-intentioned but misguided Christian people fall into the trap of feeling that it is their job, spiritually speaking, to rescue people from what they view as a future filled with eternal damnation. Believing in Christ has, in fact, been framed by them as the only antidote on earth to an otherwise sure eternity of deserved but horrifying eternal torment. And further, they think that beating people over the head with John 3:16 is the answer.

But rather than quote scripture *at* people, really the best thing that an earnest follower of Jesus can do is grasp one's own salvation in Jesus, one's own experience of grace, what *that* really means at its core, and share *that* experience with others. The most enticing way to share the good news of the gospel is to exude genuine gratitude, or compassion, or peace, or joy as the direct result of living a life of faith in Christ.



William C. Martin in his book, “The Art of Pastoring” writes:
“Your task as a pastor is impossible. Consider the demands: ‘Show us God.’ ‘Tell us what God wants.’ ‘Lead us to God.’

“If you think you can do these things, you are already deceived. But you CAN find your own soul and perhaps show others how you did *that*. -William C. Martin, The Art of Pastoring: Contemplative Reflections (Decatur, Ga.: CTS Press, 2001), 14.

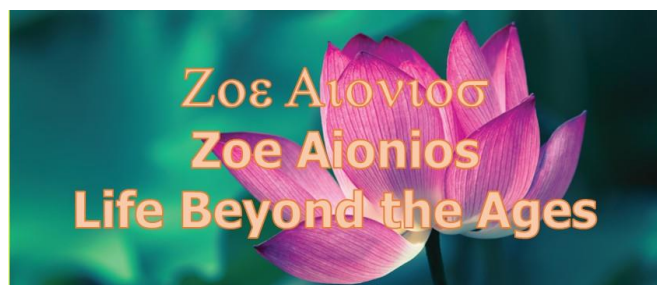
This is not only true for pastors; it is true for everyone.



Finding your unique and authentic soul connection to God in Christ and living completely and openly out of that is the best and most effective way to share the good news of the gospel.

It is not my erudite explanations *about* God that touch people and make a difference. In fact, they alone are as likely to create a stumbling block as they are to lead people *to* the sacred. What touches others and sticks are stories that express an authentic *experience* of God – stories that either come *from* or reflect *who I am* and who others *are* as children of God and followers of Christ.

That is, in fact, what Jesus tries to do with Nicodemus – communicate an experience of God that is missing for Nicodemus. And what is that?



Well, Jesus calls it Ζοε ΑΙΩΝΙΟΣ Zoe Aionios. “Zoe” is Greek for “life” and “Aionios is Greek literally for “beyond the ages” Aionios is usually interpreted as “eternal” but once again that has been used so often that even *it* has become trivialized. And truth be told, “aionios” does not focus on time as we know it at all, but on a present reality that *reflects* the eternal – that which is beyond time, that which is untouched by time, that which is beyond the ages.

My New Testament professor in Seminary, Matthias Rissi insisted that “zoe aionios” referred, not to length of life, but to quality of life. He translated it as “eschatological” life – that is life so robust that it thrives beyond all endings. I like that.



And Jesus says you experience this by being born from above. It's not the easiest concept to understand so it makes sense that Nicodemus would be confused. What the heck is Jesus talking about?

He is talking about an eternal quality of life that most are missing but many spend a lifetime looking for – what those in the East often refer to as the eternal present. It is a living, not out of the regrets of the past or worries about the future, but absolutely fully in the now. It is a living from a very different center– one that comes from leaving the ego behind and gaining a perspective that is no longer self-centered but God centered, allowing one to observe one's life from that third eye, God's eye, position – from above, as it were – opening the possibility of a new kind of freedom and joy.

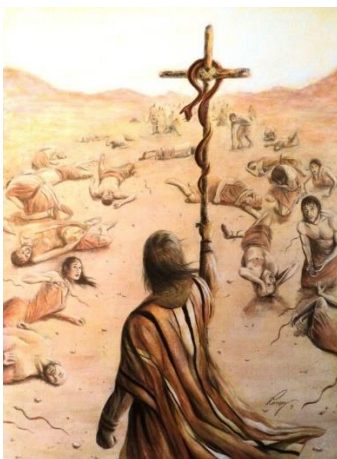
“And how do you get *that*?” Asks Nicodemus.

“Look up,” Jesus says. “Look up at the Crucified One and believe. In other words, wake up from your trance to see, to really see. Look up from your petty concerns and see my way of sacrificial love and death as *the* way to eschatological life.

“What?” says Nicodemus.

“Exactly,” says Jesus.

“But I don't understand,” says Nicodemus.



So, what does Jesus do? He moves from concept to story. He says, “Well, like the Israelites who were surrounded at one time by poisonous snakes but were asked by God not to look down with worry and fear about where they were stepping but, with eyes awake with faith, to look *up* at the brazen serpent on the rod of Moses.”

“What?” says Nicodemus.

“Exactly,” says Jesus. “You come by this *zoe aionios*, this eschatological life, by surrendering to me and *my* way of seeing where suffering and death are put into perspective with new eyes of faith. Lift up your head Nick, lift up your head to the cross. For I, when I am lifted up, will draw all to me.”

But that’s crazy talk – isn’t it? I mean most of us build our lives around being as careful as we can about staying away from snakes – about stepping around suffering and death if we can.

So did Nicodemus. He came to Jesus by night so that not even his reputation among the other Pharisees would suffer. The way of death and suffering being a possible way to true life? How can that be?



You all remember Steven Hawking – right? He was the famous astrophysicist at Cambridge University. He advanced Einstein’s work on relativity and was credited with the mathematical calculations suggesting the existence of black holes in space. And Dr. Hawking, as most of you know, was also afflicted with the rare degenerative neuromuscular disorder (ALS) or Lou Gehrig’s disease that several years ago, at the age of 76, finally took his life.

At that point, he had been confined to a wheelchair for years. He communicated by a computer that responded to the tiniest movement of his eyes. What you may not know is that before he became ill, life held little interest for Hawking. It was an exercise in sheer boredom. He drank too much and did little work. But when he learned he had ALS and, at the time, was only given a few years to live, his life underwent a radical change.

Claiming to be happier *after* he was afflicted than before, Hawking has said, “When one’s expectations by the prospect of suffering and death are reduced to zero, one really appreciates everything one has. Suddenly each day became precious and meaningful to me.” *Omni*, February 1979, 46.

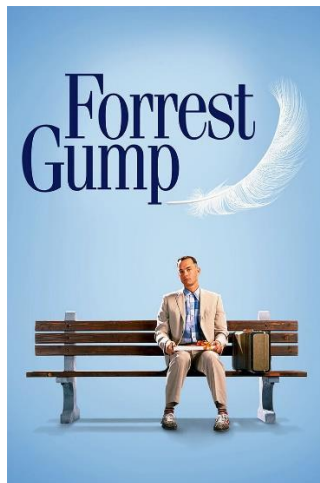


Zoe aionios – it comes from looking suffering and death square in the face while being confident that if we pay attention, we may discover that it is a gateway to perceiving and conceiving differently – a gateway to something else altogether.

“Look up and see my way of sacrificial love and death as *the* way to eschatological life,” says Jesus, “the way of the Spirit that blows where it wills.”

To which Nicodemus replies, “*Now* there is a Spirit that blows? What in the world are you talking about?”

Poor Nicodemus. He is a literal, unimaginative thinker, encountering God in the flesh who, as it turns out, has a rather imaginative and symbolic way of communicating an experience, that, well, *has* to be experienced to really be understood. Winds of the Spirit. What *was* Jesus getting at?



The 1994 Academy award winner for best film of the year was Forest Gump. Although in the intervening years, cynics have caused the film to come under attack, in my opinion, the movie’s overall meaning is, well, biblical.

Have you ever noticed as the opening credits roll on the screen, the feather that floats through the air and lands at the feet of Forest Gump? Forest is waiting for the bus to get where he needs to

go. He picks up the feather and carefully places it in the book he is carrying – “Curious George Goes to School.”



At the end of the film, his own son, young Forrest Junior is waiting – at the same place where his dad once waited a generation ago – also to go to school – and he is carrying the same book. As his father opens it, the feather falls out and is swept up by the wind once again, taking it to who knows where.



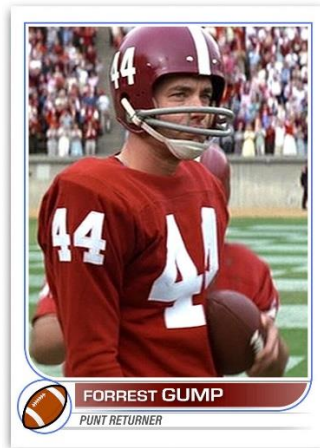
The framing of the film by the feather symbolizes that life takes us along to who knows where... that life, zoe, like a floating feather, goes where the winds of circumstance takes it, making arbitrary twists and turns, until it coincidentally lands at one place rather than another.

But maybe there is another message, one that comes through the larger story line of Forest Gump. Because that symbolic feather has also served as a kind of *spiritual* marker as well, showing Forest that regardless of how his life may appear to float along on the wind currents of change, there is something that guides and holds him.

The feather is therefore *not* random or capricious but represents the same life of the Spirit, the same Zoe Aionios that Jesus is talking about in our morning passage.

What therefore seems to be accidental, just coincidentally being in the right place at the right time...

his entrance onto the Alabama football team,



his meeting of President Kennedy,



his saving of Lieutenant Dan in Vietnam,



his meeting of President Johnson,



his becoming a table tennis champion,



his fortune made in the shrimp business,



his investment in Apple computers,



his kick-off of the running craze of the 80's



and the list goes on.

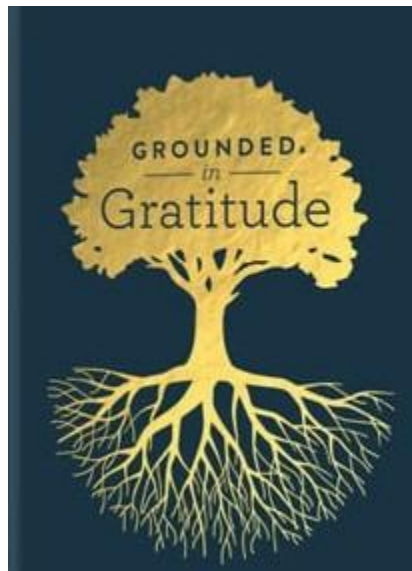
All of these seeming accidents, so ludicrous that they contribute greatly to the comedy of the film, all these “coincidences” are really much more than that.



Because the real message here is what *can* happen when even the simplest of men faithfully honor their commitment *to* life, *to* Zoe Aionios, no matter the cost. And if the feather represents the Zoe Aionios that Jesus was talking about, then the deep commitment of Forrest to *it* is represented in the film alternately by the people Forrest loves – his mother, his childhood sweetheart, Jenny, his friend, Bubba, his commander in the field, Lieutenant Dan and finally his son, Forrest, Jr.

Gump's brain may be slow, but his soul most definitely is not. In that respect, the character of Forrest is a Christ-like figure.

Meanwhile, we, being more like Nicodemus than Forrest Gump, with our parallel strivings to get it all just right so that we can keep from suffering and ensure our futures, might *imagine* meeting a past president and having an effect on history, or scoring a touchdown in a crucial championship game, or being a hero on the battlefield and finally connecting with the great love of our lives. But these, the apostle John reminds us, are the strivings born only of the flesh – strivings born out of ego – whereas Gump and Jesus are both absolutely unconcerned about their egos while being singularly true to the love that brings one to Zoe Aionios.



So, what is Zoe Aionios? It is something that is grounded in a deep gratitude for life that issues in a celebration of being alive right now in this moment – of living and breathing love and compassion in such a way that the eternal breaks through. And it is born from a Christ-like willingness to risk it all in order to have it.



It is this deep feeling of wellness; that everything that has been has unfolded perfectly to make this moment possible. It is the wiping away of all regrets, all anxiety, all future worry. It is the assurance that I am not alone in this universe – that I am forever surrounded with a love so deep and vast that when I experience it in its fullness, it takes my breath away and just makes me want to cry or shout because it is so beautiful.

Jesus came to show us that way. Jesus was the prototype, the prime example of what a life lived fully in relation to God and Zoe Aionios looks like such that focusing on him as *the* way leads me to attempt to live this unique one-of-a-kind life that is mine in the same way he did – not aping Jesus – but living this life of mine faithfully and fully as only I, with God’s help in relation to what I know and have experienced *as* God, can.

“For God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son that whosoever should have faith in *him* and *his* way should not come to a meaningless end but should be filled with life welling up into eternity.” This is the good news of the gospel – now go get it. Go and live it. Let us pray.

Gracious God, we, like Nicodemus come to you searching for answers. Help us to find those answers in our willingness to give everything for the Zoe Aionios you promise in Jesus. We pray in Christ’s name, amen.