

THE MESSAGE for Nov 6, 2011

John 3:16-21

Is There a “Center” to Scripture?

The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

Today we consider the question – *Is There a “Center” to Scripture?* In every great story there are many plots but there is usually one common plot or common theme that appears over and over again and again throughout the story. That is true of the Bible too. There is a “center” to the Bible. There is a common theme throughout the Bible.

Let’s consider both a practical and a theological answer to this question – *is there a “center” to Scripture?* First – the practical answer. Perhaps you have heard this before. I think it’s pretty cool:

Psalm 117 is the shortest chapter in the Bible.

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible.

Psalm 118 is the center chapter in the Bible.

There are 594 chapters before Psalm 118

There are 594 chapters after Psalm 118

$594 + 594 = 1188$

When we turn to Psalm 118:8, it reads – *“It is better to take refuge in the Lord, than to put confidence in mortals.”*

That’s what the Bible says in the center. That’s a common theme in the Bible. Trust in the Lord. *I put my trust in the Lord.* Can you say that? Can you say it and believe it? Say it with me, *“I put my trust in the Lord.”*

This week I invite you to begin every day before you wipe the sleep from your eyes, before you climb out of bed – before you take that first sip of coffee or tea say, “Today, Lord, I put my trust in you.” And then watch how God blesses you throughout the day. God will! This week let’s put our trust in the Lord.

Now the theological answer to our question.

We could say that the center of the Bible is the theme that Jesus is Lord. And that God’s love flows into our lives through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Every page in the Bible points to Jesus and what he has done for us by bringing God’s love into the world.

John 3:16 is perhaps the best-known verse in the entire Bible. It’s been translated into more languages than any other verse. It appears on license plates, billboards, bumper stickers, and at football games. This is the first verse many people memorize because it is “the gospel in a single verse.”

So let's take a look at this verse phrase by phrase.

“For God so loved the world.” Notice it doesn't say that God so loved the church, or Christians, or people who believe the right thing, or do the right thing, or say the right thing. It says that God so loved the world. The world is the object of God's love. May I have, “WOW!”

“That he gave his only son.” God's love for the world is revealed in the fact that God became one of us in Jesus. God became incarnate. And that has made all the difference. Now – because of Jesus nothing can separate us from God's love not even death itself. May I have a “Thank You, Jesus!”

“So that everyone who believes in him ...” We often use statements that say we believe in Jesus. But there is more to it than just saying we believe in Jesus. That's like saying we believe that Saturn has 62 moons (which it does by the way). But saying that statement doesn't really change our lives. Saying we believe in Jesus calls for action. It calls for us to align our lives to his. Living the way Jesus lived because we truly believe that Jesus is Lord of our lives.

Story: Charles Blondin was a world famous tightrope walker. He came to fame in June of 1859 when he became the first person to walk on a tightrope stretched across the Niagara Falls – 160 feet in the air.

He crossed that quarter mile on a tightrope several times, each time doing a different daring feat - with a bag of sand on his back, on stilts, on a bicycle, he even carried a stove and cooked an omelet!

Each time he crossed over the crowds grew larger and larger on both sides of the falls. Then as Blondin carefully walked across the tightrope, blindfolded, the crowd “Oooohed!” and “Aaaaahed!” with every step he took.

Upon reaching the other side, the crowd's applause was louder than the roar of the falls! Blondin then placed a wheelbarrow on the tightrope and asked the audience: “Do you believe I can push this wheelbarrow across to the other side while blindfolded?”

The crowd shouted, “Yes, yes, yes. You are the greatest tightrope walker in the world. You can do anything!”

“Okay,” said Blondin, “Who is willing to get into the wheelbarrow?” As the story goes no one did!

We say that we believe in Jesus but are we willing to get into his wheelbarrow to take a risk and live the kind of life he calls us to live? The word “believe” in Greek means “to live by.”

Finally the phrase, “will not perish but have eternal life.” For John eternal life doesn't begin after we die, it's a life we can experience right now, right here, with Jesus.

Jesus established God's kingdom on earth; a Kingdom already, but not yet fully. God's Kingdom is where forgiveness and reconciliation reign, where peace and justice are a reality all around us. In other words eternal life begins right now with God in this world by the way we live with Jesus in his wheelbarrow.

In summary John 3:16 tells us that God loves the world – became intimately present in the world through Jesus who established a Kingdom of love – through forgiveness and reconciliation, peace and justice. As we trust more and more in Jesus, we align our lives to his, experiencing life from a whole new perspective. Daring to believe that with Jesus anything and everything is possible.

That is a common theme throughout the Bible. God always has, and always will be up to something in the world because the world is the object of God's love.

John 3:16 should be read with John 3:17 which states, *“Indeed, God did not send the Son to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

Jesus came to save the world. If God doesn't condemn the world then neither should we. If God loves the world then so should we because we say that we believe in Jesus.

I realize that some people have this idea that God's heart is full of anger, wrath and condemnation. That theme appears in the Bible. But it's not the central theme. It's a theme that points out that God doesn't turn a blind eye to sin or injustice and neither should we. When my children do something wrong, my tone can seem pretty harsh. When we, as children of God, do something wrong, God's tone can seem pretty harsh...

Martin Luther often viewed God as an angry judge who watched over his every move. Luther felt that he could never appease God until he realized that God isn't an angry judge, God is a loving father. That's what John 3:16 & 17 says about God. That's what the Bible says about God.

Consider this story...

When Alyssa was born, her father, Daniel, held her in his arms, awestruck by the wonder of this new life. Daniel was overwhelmed by an outrageous and irrational love he felt for her. As he rocked her in the delivery room, he whispered into her ear, “I love you, little Alyssa, and I always will.”

It was a promise he intended to keep no matter what the cost. In that moment, Daniel could not have imagined how great that cost would be.

Alyssa was a strong-willed child early on. At first it was cute – wanting to do things for herself – doing things her own way. As a teenage, Alyssa's strong will took a rebellious turn. She began to fail in school. Started hanging out with the wrong crowd. She became a discipline problem. At 13, she started smoking, soon it was a pack of

cigarettes a day, then developed a passion for marijuana and alcohol. Her parents got her into counseling, they went for counseling too, but things went from bad to worse.

At 16, Alyssa was in treatment for addiction twice but relapsed both times. She was arrested for possession of narcotics twice, and each time Daniel bailed her out she promised to never do drugs again.

Alyssa dropped out of school and would run away from home for a week at a time. Often coming home to sleep in her room for days at a time before disappearing again. Money and valuables also began to disappear from the house.

One day Alyssa stopped coming home. No note. No phone call. No text message. No e-mail. Nothing. Daniel had no idea where she went or if she was even alive. For six months, all he could do was pray and wait.

Then one day the phone rang. It was a high school friend of Alyssa's. She said she had seen Alyssa in a neighboring city, selling herself for money to buy drugs. She was living in a crack house. Daniel hung up the phone and wept uncontrollably. He wept tears of frustration, anger, fear, and hurt. He wept tears that had been bottled up inside of him for years. And when he ran out of tears he prayed for strength, got into his car and drove to that city in search for his daughter.

He found her just as her friend said. It took Daniel a minute to recognize her. She was passed out on the floor in a filthy, abandoned building. She looked like just another piece of trash on a floor among the filth and drug paraphernalia. Daniel bent down to pick her up and she felt as light as the day she was born. Although passed out, Daniel whispered into her ear the words he had first spoken 18 years before: "I love you, little Alyssa, and I always will."

That's the story we find at the "center" of the Bible. It's a story of a God who loves us with an outrageous and irrational love. It's a story of our rebellion, our bondage, our sinfulness. It's a story of the One who has come into this world, not to condemn it, but has the power to save us, restore us, and make us new. It's a life-giving story of the One who whispers from the cross to each one of us, "I love you, my child, and I always will." Amen.