

## Eternal Life Now—John 3: 16-17 (March 17, 2024-5<sup>th</sup> Lent)

A few years ago I read a fascinating article on near death experiences,<sup>1</sup> where people while being clinically dead, upon regaining consciousness, report having floated above their bodies, observing the reactions of family and friends, noting details about conversations between nurses and doctors and entering into a place of incredible peace, acceptance and bonding. Many of these people report getting great insight into their lives that prompt profound changes in their priorities and circumstances such as their work and relationships. These people come back to life with the sense that they were not merely saved from death, they are saved for life. They were not just saved from something; they are saved for something.

*“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.”* With apologies for the gendered language, but that is how it’s usually quoted by evangelical and fundamentalist Christians who believe that God sends Jesus into the world to save us from something; hell, eternal damnation. Many of us in the United Church have a hard time with that because religion then becomes about getting it right, making sure our beliefs are accurate and obsessing about moral correctness in ourselves and others. If salvation is just about being saved from something we are doomed to live in fear, uncertainty and insecurity. There’s another way to look at the whole concept of salvation and this passage in particular, Richard Rohr elaborates in this [video](#)<sup>2</sup> clip.

The late American preacher William Sloane Coffin says we have a choice when it comes to Christian faith, he asks; “Will we be scared to death or brought to life?” Jesus comes from a tradition that speaks of salvation, not as a future reward for right belief and right living but rather that faith saves us now. Life isn’t a test with a reward at the end, but rather it is the arena of God’s activity right now. We are not saved from something in the future, we are saved for something in the here and now—wholeness, freedom and peace so that we can be partners with God in the world.

We’re not saved from something, so much as saved for something. So, how do we make sense of the concept of “eternal life”. What does it mean to be saved for eternal life? Most often we think about that time after we die. We think about life forever with God. But John often speaks of Jesus as the coming of eternal life and of eternal life as a present reality and possibility. Eternal life in the present tense.

*“Very truly I tell you anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.”<sup>3</sup> (5:24)*

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<sup>1</sup> Alanna Mitchell, *To the Brink and Back*, [Broadview Magazine](#), <https://broadview.org/near-death-experiences/>

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr, *Antiseptic Christianity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZ3C72NegBQ>, from The *Work of the People* video subscription service, clipped from a longer video.

<sup>3</sup> John 5: 24.

The late theologian, William Placher<sup>4</sup> looked into John's concept of eternal life and made some profound insights.

Placher begins by talking about time generally. He says, we all experience time differently. For example, while I may think this sermon is very interesting and time flies by for me, your experience might be different and time might seem to drag. Remember the summers when you were a kid? They seemed to go on forever, now they're eight week blips that disappear in an instant. Time seems to speed up as you get older.

In other words, time isn't just a line we move along, it has character and different qualities depending on how we experience it. That's the key to adding another layer of understanding to the promise of eternal life. Think about how you experience time—how you experience your past, your future and your present. I would say, and I include myself in this, that it is the rare person that doesn't, to some extent, experience their past as a burden, their future as a threat and their present as fleeting. We look at the past and see all the decisions and turns of fate that lead us to where we are and regret what we can't change. We look at the future and become anxious about all the unknowns. Caught between regret about the past and anxiety about the future our present is obliterated. We are hardly ever fully present, to ourselves and to one another. The present is used either try to escape our past or to obsess about and control our future. Our society is full of the evidence—addictions, depression, anxiety and consumerism. Time for many of us is an enemy, full of regrets, threats and limitations.

Jesus walked the line of time like we all do, he lived from birth toward death. Yet, the Jesus of the gospel writers experiences time differently than many of us do. There is hardly any sense of attachment to his past. There is no sentimentality or regret. The only relevance his past seems to have is that his origins are in God. His past is simply life unfolding in the presence of God. The Jesus of the gospels also has almost no anxiety about the future.<sup>5</sup> He sees the future as moving him ever closer to fulfillment, to ultimate unity, to God, to a return home to the place from which he came, regardless of the tragedies and joys that might cross his path. Jesus' life marches toward death. But death is simply a gateway. Jesus lives with a secure and deeply embedded knowledge of his divine origin and of his divine destination. He knows where he came from and he knows where he is going.

Because of this there is a peace about the present for him, the present is not ruled by either regret or anxiety, he simply lives every moment to the fullest, completely present and open to whatever or whomever life places in his path. We see this constantly in the gospel stories, Jesus seeing beyond appearances to the essence of people and situations: the presence of God in everyone, the call of God in every situation. For Jesus, the present is pregnant with possibility and opportunity, the present isn't a battleground, but a playground. The present is a place of exploration and risk-taking, of freedom and

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<sup>4</sup> Much of the rest of this sermon relies on Placher's work in his book, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*.

<sup>5</sup> The agony in the Garden of Gethsemane being a notable exception.

surprises. The minutes, hours, days and years of Jesus' life are lived eternally, without the limitations of the past and the future, but fully and completely in the present and presence of God.

To have eternal life is to live in a such way that time becomes our friend, not a fleeting source of regret and anxiety but a source of joy and wonder at the gradual opening of a gift that has been entrusted to us. To live eternally is to look back in gratitude to our origins as being from God and forward in hope to God as our destination. In between is the adventure we call life. It is to live in the knowledge that our lives have a purpose and they hold the promise of fulfillment and wholeness. We are saved from the burden of regret and the weight of anxiety, where life becomes not a test or exam that we must pass in order to earn the reward of salvation, but rather an adventure that unfolds before us. We aren't just saved from something, we are saved for something, for eternal life in the here and now.

What do we do this? I believe the God of grace doesn't want us to use this as judgement against ourselves if we're filled with regret about our past, anxiety about our future and if our present is battleground filled with distraction and escapism. I believe the God of grace wants to give us hope amid our messy, complex lives. Hope that God is here amid it all, sitting deeper, waiting for us to surrender into the peace of the Holy presence. Maybe that's a good way to pray, "God, I know you're here in this messy, messed up moment, help me be in the moment with you that I may have eternal life."

In the second century the bishop of Lyon, Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive". That is the promise of salvation for those on the Jesus path to God; "God did not send the son into the world to condemn it." But so that those who believe might have eternal life." Not a far off promise, a present possibility in which we can share in the life of Jesus—as a child of God. We are not merely saved from something, we are saved for something, for eternal life, right here, right now. May it be so. Amen.

Rev. Joe Gaspar