

The World. The Whole World.

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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September 14, 2025 (Season of Creation)

Scripture Reading John 3:13-17

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.

—

Hilda, the abbess of Whitby, hosted a Synod of the church in Britain in the 7th century. Its agenda: to decide the date of Easter. In 664, this was not a simple question for the king and bishops who gathered where Scotland and England now meet. The answer would determine much of the next thousand years of Christian tradition in Europe.¹

Because under that agenda was a question: should the church in this region follow the ways of Rome or Iona? Should Christians model their faith on Peter or John?

¹ This history is outlined by J. Philip Newell in the Introduction to *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*.

Christianity had only made it to this place in the 4th century. Whitby, including the monks and nuns and Christian community there, were deeply influenced by Celtic ways including indigenous spirituality and nature-wisdom in Ireland and Scotland, through the missionaries of Iona Abbey. The Roman church, moving north once again after 200 years absent, had a different theology - drawn from Augustine of Canterbury and Augustine of Hippo before him.

The decision before the Synod at Whitby was the date of Easter, and how monks' hair would be cut.

The *implication* was nothing less than this:

Would Christianity be universalist or exclusivist?

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Now I know Pilgrim folks. I'm pretty sure most of us believe that God's love is universal. So if you get sleepy listening to ancient church history, try to follow me here because this moment 1400 years ago ties directly to your Christian universalism. We can trace a concept spoken of here and there for all of Christian history and that re-emerged strongly in the resurgence of Celtic Christianity - back to this ancient Christian history.

Celtic Christianity emphasizes “our God-given goodness...” with “an awareness that all created things carry within them the grace and goodness of God....listening for the heartbeat of God within all things, ourselves, one another and the whole of creation...”²

² John Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*. P. 24,32. Newell goes into detail about the theology of Pelagius, a British theologian from the 4th century who emphasized the goodness of creation and humanity would be declared a heretic for views that were in opposition to the theology of Augustine of Hippo. Newell, Chapter 1.

Roman Christianity at that point had begun to centralize and become uniform. In the Roman Christian tradition of those centuries, a Christian had to be baptized in order to be saved because of Augustine's teachings on original sin.

You may have guessed that the Synod at Whitby, 664, concluded that the church in that place would align with the practices and theology of the Roman church. Easter would be on the Roman church date, the monks' hairdos would be southern style - and by implication the theology of original sin would hold sway over the inherent goodness of creation and humanity within the Western Church, including Protestant theology through Calvin and the other Reformers. In other words - all the way through to the Congregational tradition as well as the Church of Scotland.

Until, that is, the last hundred or so years.

Now - the pockets of Celtic Christianity and the renewed influence of that spirituality is a story for another day, and folks - a pastor's month in Scotland equals 27 sermons so we'll get there.

But I'm going to stick to today's point, and to do that we have to get back to the Gospel of John and our text this morning. *It matters* what our key underlying theology is as we read this text. If, foundational to our faith, is that creation and humanity are inherently unworthy - then we could read this text and the verses around it with an exclusivist lens. Declare your belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and be baptised or be excluded from the salvation of God.

If, foundational to our faith, is the belief that creation and humanity are inherently good and creation and humanity are channels of the

heartbeat of God and testimonies to God's goodness and love - we could have a different reading of this text. John Philip Newell observes that the perspective of John's Gospel is a universal one, and "John's canvas is the whole cosmos."³ With a universalist lens, this verse declares the unbounded love and graciousness of our Creator, who will never give up on their relationship with their Creation. Who will go to every length imaginable and some lengths we cannot imagine, to move us toward the goodness for which we have been created.

Whenever the world is in need, God incarnates. This is a teaching from a Vedic tradition, shared by one of our members with Bible Study this week. It sounds an awful lot like the central verse of our gospel reading today. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son... When the world is in need, God incarnates. God shows up. The starting point of both of these teachings is that God loves the world, the whole world, God is in relationship with the world, and God loves the world enough to enter into the world to help.

In the beginning, according to the Gospel of John, in the beginning, the first words of that rather esoteric, 'Gnostic' story of Christ - Christ is there, in the beginning. Part of God. Part of creation and creating. The word of God, the breath of God, made flesh, made earthly, made incarnate - for the good of the world, a gift to the cosmos, the whole world.

Let me come back to the core of the message I'm trying to deliver this morning, the core of the Celtic Christian theology that I've been marinating in these last months. Creation is essentially Good. God is in creation, so where we revel in creation, we revel in God. The whole cosmos cries out in praise to God - make a joyful noise to God, all the earth (Psalm 100) and we are creatures, part of this beautiful world.

³ Newell, p. 96.

To witness the beauty of creation is to witness God's goodness and love for all of creation. We are invited to be part of the divine love. To love what God loves is to love and treasure and steward and show up for this good and beautiful and hurting and vulnerable creation.

Oh may I be really radical this morning, folks? May I ask this question? The world, the world right now, is in need - temperatures rising, storms raging, fires burning and that's just the climate. The world is in need. How is God incarnating right now? *God so loves this world* - who is God sending right now to embody and flesh out God's own care for the world? Perhaps I can be so radical to propose that in this moment, God is sending us. No, I am not saying we are anointed in the way of Christ - but God sends people in every age to be prophets and healers. We have a part in God's love for the world in this moment.

In the words of Jesuit Gregory Boyle, "We're born from love and always invited to love. The incarnation gives flesh to God; then we participate in this whole-making of divine love."⁴

Next week we're going to ask the question, how do we accept that commission in the face of the destruction of the earth. How do we write a hopeful story for the future of God's good and beautiful world?

But for now, we as creatures of God's colorful cosmos, join in song.

(De Colores....)

⁴ Gregory Boyle, *Cherished Belonging*. 2025. p. 40 With thanks to Judy who pointed out this new book to me last week!