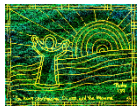




One of my favorite children's books –  
one I always loved reading to my own boys –  
is called *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown.  
“Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away.  
So he said to his mother, I am running away.”  
“If you run away,” said his mother,  
“I will run after you. For you are my little bunny.”  
The rest of the book details all the ways the little bunny may run away and hide,  
and the ways his mother will catch up with him.  
I will become a rock on the mountain, high above you, he says  
- Then I will be a mountain climber, and I will climb to where you are  
I will be a crocus in a hidden garden  
- Then I will be a gardener, and I will find you.  
I will be a bird and fly away from you  
- If you become a bird, I will be a tree that you come home to.  
My favorite one is – I will join a circus and fly away on a flying trapeze  
- Then I will be a tightrope walker, and I will walk across the air to you.  
Finally, the bunny decides he may as well stay home,  
and the story ends with a cuddle and a carrot.



I was reminded of this story this week as I read Psalm 139,  
with its similar theme of God's unwavering care for us.

The first stanza of the psalm speaks of how God knows us:

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me,  
You know when I sit and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away*

The second stanza speaks of God's constant presence with us:

*If I take wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

This is a God who pursues us tirelessly, who never lets us go –  
a God who has claimed us as God's own and never gives up on us.

The third stanza of the Psalm reminds us that God – Creator of all things – created and formed us as well.

It reminds us that we – every one of us! – are fearfully and wonderfully made. And our reading ends with these words –

I come to the end – I am still with you.

This is the God who is always present, through all our endings and beginnings. The end of a relationship. The end of a job. The very frayed end of our rope! God is there.

God's steadfast love is always in our lives.

The God who made each of us, fearfully and wonderfully, in God's own image.



This psalm is a beautiful background for the words of Jesus in today's gospel reading:

*For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son,  
so that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life.*

This may be the most famous verse of the Bible.

And, like so many famous verses, often misused or misunderstood.

It is misused when it is intended as some kind of sorting mechanism:

If you believe – ie. agree with the idea that Jesus is God's son –  
you will be saved and go to heaven;

if you do not believe, you will not be saved and will perish in hell.

Such a reading removes the verse from the context necessary to understand it – both the verse which immediately follows, and the context of John's gospel.

Verse 16 needs to be followed by verse 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.*

God's act in sending Jesus into the world to dwell among us is an act of love, not an intention to sort or test or judge, but to save us.

To bring new beginnings to all our endings.

To bring new life out of death and evil, sin and despair.

*For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son,  
so that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life.*

There are two parts of this that deserve a closer look in the context of John's gospel.

First is the word "believe."

For John, belief in Jesus is not a matter of intellectual assent –

do you believe that a person named Jesus lived in the world  
and was the son of God?  
Instead, belief in Jesus refers to a relationship of trust for Jesus and his teachings,  
and a sense of abiding in Jesus.  
Belief means centering and grounding one's life in the love and grace of Jesus.

Which brings us to the idea of "eternal life."  
So often that has been heard simply as life after death,  
often with the idea that that life is a reward or punishment  
based on whether one is or is not a Christian.  
But for John, eternal life is more than that.  
Eternal life is precisely what one experiences when one abides in Jesus –  
abundant life, grace upon grace.  
Eternal life is something we experience now,  
when we are living in trust of God,  
living the way of love Jesus revealed to us.  
Eternal life in God begins now and continues through eternity –  
even death is not an ending.



Jesus offers these words at the end of his encounter with the religious figure Nicodemus.

This encounter is one of several in John's gospel  
intended to reveal who Jesus is,  
and the various ways people respond to Jesus.  
We don't immediately see how Nicodemus responds –  
he seems to disappear from the story  
when Jesus begins his long explanation and teaching.  
But later, Nicodemus will reappear,  
and perhaps there we see how his encounter with Jesus affects him.  
When the temple leaders and police are ready to arrest Jesus,  
Nicodemus speaks up for him, insisting that he have a hearing  
before they condemn him.  
And after Jesus is crucified, Nicodemus is among the men who remove his body  
from the cross and bring spices and ointments to prepare it for burial.



John's pattern of encounter with Jesus and response to Jesus is not just in stories, but one that is repeated in our lives as people of faith.

We, too, encounter God, and respond.

This week I told someone I was preaching about John 3:16 and God's love for the world, and their response was –

Still? Why?

We might wonder, as the news of violence and disruption falls on us daily.

Yet, as our New Testament class is reading this week,

the violence of the world, the empire's practice of might makes right,  
is not a new thing in the world.

And still, Jesus tells us, God's judgment has already been made –

and it was this –

for God so loves the world that God sent the only son  
to offer us abundant, eternal life.

Right here, right now, in the midst of struggle and fear.

Scholar and pastor David Lose writes,

*For God so loved the world ...*

*This is the first and last word of this Gospel, indeed of the whole Christian story. So perhaps the task isn't so much to offer us an option – would you like to receive God's love and grace? – as it is to declare to us God's judgment and decision – God loves you and all the world! – and step back to see what happens.*

God loves you. God loves the world.

Given that knowledge, that gift of grace, how are we to respond?

John invites us to respond with trust and love for God –

abiding, resting, remaining in God's love.

Even – especially – in these hard days.

And then he gives us a new commandment –

that we love others as Jesus has loved us.

Remembering that God's promise in Psalm 139,

God's judgement of love and salvation in John 3:16 and 17 –  
is not just for us, but for all the world and all its people.

May we live in God's love,

and then live *out* God's love in the world around us.

May we be relentless and untiring in sharing God's love

with all who need such great good news.

In Jesus name. Amen.