

## **“God Loves This World?”**

*The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – May 26, 2024*

*Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17*

What does God see when God looks at the world? For that question even to make sense you must either buy or sell the idea that God is “out there” somewhere at all.

But if you buy it, then perhaps what just came to your mind was one of those pictures of our planet taken from space that make it look like a blue marble. The problem is, such pictures cannot be the extent of the divine view because the Bible describes God as being intimately involved in the lives of humankind, and the blue marble perspective is just too distant.

What we need is a Google Earth View. That way we can zoom in from space, past the clouds and hover just over your house. But even this type of view is limiting to God. That’s because, according to the Bible, even the perspective of this three-dimensional view does not allow us to see the world as God sees it. The way God sees the world, the Bible says, is through the lens of love.

Sounds simplistic, but let’s unpack this for a few moments.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ...” says John 3:16, the most well-known verse from the whole Bible. It has been called the “gospel in miniature,” and indeed, it does convey the heart of the gospel message.

The verse says, “God so loved the world,” but in our minds, we probably translate that to mean, “God so loved the people who inhabit the planet earth.” And that seems fair, for one of the meanings of “world” is “the human race.”

But if John meant only “the people who inhabit the planet Earth,” why didn’t any of the several Bible translations translate this verse that

way? They all simply say “world,” which is a rendering of the original Greek word, kosmos.

But — are you paying attention? — the first definition of that word is NOT “people,” but “orderly arrangement.” Our English word “cosmos” comes from that Greek word, and it’s used to mean the universe regarded as an orderly, harmonious whole, as opposed to being chaotic.

Admittedly, both the Greek and English versions of the word can also mean “the world” in either the wide sense of the earth itself and all that’s in it or in the narrow sense of just the human inhabitants of the earth, but those are secondary meanings. We usually understand the word in this verse to convey just that narrower definition, but there’s room to wonder.

As it happens, the Greek of John’s day included another word that can also mean “world” but specifically refers to the part of the earth that is inhabited. That word is oikoumene, which literally means “I inhabit,” but John didn’t use it in this verse.

John chose kosmos for a reason. In fact, he may have had two reasons: One is that in John’s day, although oikoumene could be used to refer to all the inhabitants of the earth, it was more commonly used to mean the Roman world, the lands inhabited by civilized people, excluding, therefore, the areas where barbarians lived. Thus, we can see why John did not write, “For God so loved the oikoumene that he gave his only Son ...” That could be taken to mean that God loves only the beautiful people, the cultured class, people of old and new money — God loves those people, but not the marginalized, not the stranger and alien, not the poor and the uneducated, not the outsider, not the immigrant.

No, John certainly used kosmos because he wanted to be clear that no one anywhere was outside the realm of God’s love.

The second possible reason that John used kosmos is that John actually meant that God wants: harmony and order and not chaos.

The point is that God loves us so much that he sent his Son to save us from the chaos of sin, the chaos that ultimately causes us to perish. God sent his Son to restore the orderly arrangement of life that leads to eternal life.

Even though we cannot see the world as God sees it, we are incapable of loving the whole world. Only God can love all the Cosmos. We have a limited ability, which allows us to love our neighbor and maybe some of our enemies. Thanks be to God, that God is capable of the wide field of love that allows him to embrace the whole world.

But in saying that, we should also acknowledge that speaking of God's love for the whole world is hard to get our minds around. The realm is just too big. Fortunately, God has yet another view of the world, a view that focuses his love on us one by one.

An old preacher once said that the best way to hear the gospel in John 3:16 is to substitute your own name for "world." Try it with your name: "FOR GOD SO LOVED **[YOUR NAME]** THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON, SO THAT IF **[YOUR NAME]** BELIEVES IN HIM, **[YOUR NAME]** MAY NOT PERISH BUT MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE."

Writer Anne Lamott tells of a personal experience that helped her grasp the extent of God's love. She lives on the West Coast, and one day several years ago, she was walking on the beach with her young son. Not far off, they saw a man severely abusing his dog.

Anne's son immediately wanted his mother to intervene, but she, frankly, was frightened by the man's viciousness. Eventually another woman on the beach yelled for the man to stop, but he just laughed at her. He finally led the brutalized dog away.

After he was gone, Anne was feeling ashamed of what she saw as her own cowardice, and as she and Sam continued down the beach, she

found herself praying, saying simply, “Please.” She says she didn’t even know what she was asking for, but that thought about the word “ask” reeled up a memory from something that had happened in church the week before. One of the members had told the congregation about how she and her husband had come to adopt their little son. They had gone through an agency named ASK, which stands for Adopt Special Kids. When they applied, they had to first fill out a questionnaire with questions like “Could you adopt an addicted baby? A child with a terminal illness? With a mild or moderate intellectual disability? With tendencies toward violence against others?”

As the woman recited this list, she began to cry. At the point, the pastor stepped up beside her and said, “God is an adoptive parent, too. And [God] chose us all. [God] says, ‘Sure, I’ll take the kids who are addicted or terminal. I pick all the kids with intellectual disabilities, and of course, the ones who are angry and hurt. The selfish ones, the liars ....’”

Recalling this now on the beach, it suddenly came to Anne that “The mystery of God’s love ... is that God loves the man who was being mean to his dog just as much as he loves babies .... So of course he loves ordinary old me, especially at my most scared and petty and mean and obsessive moments. God Loves me; God chooses me.”

In other words, God, loves us even when we are a hot mess, when we are guilty of disorderly conduct, when we are in emotional or spiritual disarray.

But John’s kosmos word brings us back to the sense of order that God wants for us, and so we do well to hear the whole of John 3:16, amplified a bit by what we have learned about it:

For God so loved the orderly world he created, and all the people in it, even when they have made a mess of things and have violated the orderly arrangements he provided for them, that he gave his only Son,

so that everyone, including, of course, **[your name]**, and everyone else anywhere who believes in Him may not perish but may have the orderliness of righteousness for all eternity.

God loves us through our outbursts and turning aside, through our in-fighting and out-castings, through our front-loadings and back-sliding, through our foot-stomping and side-stepping. And God gave us his Son to save us from all that.

That's the way God really sees the world. God sees us not only as we are, but also as God calls us to be.

God sees us through the lens of love. Amen.