

“God So Loved the World” / John 3:14-21 / Lent 4B / 18 March 2012

John 3:16, one of the most familiar verses in all the Bible. For the gospel writer John, it’s all about belief. John comes right out and says, in the final chapter of his book: “All these things are written so that you”—the reader—“will believe in Jesus, and in believing, have life in his name.” But tell me, how do you make yourself...believe?

The movie “The Changeling” is just about the most harrowing film I’ve seen in recent years. The older I get, the more I appreciate lighthearted movies. But “The Changeling” is long, and serious, and it’s harrowing mostly because it’s based on real events that took place in California in the late 20s and early 30s. Early in the film, there’s a scene in St. John’s Presbyterian Church, in Los Angeles. It’s a Sunday evening service, because back in the day Presbyterians went to church twice on the Sabbath. The place is packed, all the women in their big feathery hats. The elders on session, all men, are wearing black and sitting up on the chancel with the minister, “overseeing” the worship service. And the minister, played by John Malkovich—who makes a strangely convincing Presbyterian pastor—is preaching not in a robe but in formal eveningwear. His sermon is broadcast live over the radio, as he rants about the corrupt police department in the City of Los Angeles: police brutality, excessive use of force, complete disregard for “due process,” payoffs, bribes.

The next scene is in a modest house, where you see the beautiful, melancholy Angelina Jolie playing the part of Christine, a single mother whose nine-year-old son is named Walter. Christine works at the telephone company as an operator. She rides around on roller skates and deals with customer complaints. Today Christine has the whole day off, and she’s promised to take her son Walter to the movies. But the phone rings; they need her to come to work. What are you going to do when you’re a single mom, living on a shoestring? Christine goes in to work, leaving Walter home alone. She promises him that they’ll go to the movies tomorrow. But when she gets home in the evening, Walter is gone. And Christine begins her frantic search.

Now, lest you think that I’m going to ruin the movie for you by telling you too much of the storyline, never fear! This story is just too strange to be fiction, and just when you think it can’t get any more horrible, it does. In time, a group of policemen come into the telephone company to tell Christine that they’ve found her son Walter. He’s fine. He was in Illinois with some unknown drifter. All Christine has to do is go to the train station on such-and-such a day to meet her boy, pose for a few pictures, and express her gratitude to LA’s finest, the men in blue. When the appointed day rolls around, Christine shows up at the train station accompanied by all the highest-ranking officials of the LAPD, and crowds of reporters and photographers. One officer says to her, “We need this publicity! The police have been getting too much bad publicity lately. Now we’re going to show the world that the Los Angeles Police Department isn’t all bad!” But when the boy gets off the train...it isn’t Walter. She says, “That’s not my son.” The officer in charge of her case gets indignant. “Of course it’s your son! You’re just overcome with emotions. He looks a little different because he’s been through such trauma. Just go hug him, and smile for the camera. Take him home. You just have to get used to him again. You’ll see!” And so, with all the policemen and the reporters and the cameras, Christine gives in. She takes the boy home and tries to make herself believe that he is her son. She really wants to believe it. She would love to believe that the boy is truly hers. But deep down, despite some superficial similarities, she knows it’s not.

The kid calls her “mommy,” and he answers to the name “Walter.” Until one day while she’s bathing him, Christine notices that the child is circumcised; Walter was not. And so she begins paying daily visits to the police station, insisting that this boy is not her son. At first the officer in charge of the case is gentle and insistent. With time, he gets fed up, thinking that Christine’s loud protests are going to cast a shadow over all the good publicity the LAPD got when they returned a kidnapped boy to his mother. The officer sends a doctor to her house, and the doctor assures her that the boy is shorter than before because the trauma of being kidnapped has shrunk his spine. When Christine objects that her Walter, unlike this boy, wasn’t circumcised, they tell her that kidnappers have been known to do some strange things to children. When Christine absolutely refuses to back down, insisting that they take this kid away and restart the search for Walter, well, things begin to get ugly.

The police begin to accuse Christine of being an unfit mother. They tell the newspapers that she has rejected her son because, when he was missing, she found that she really preferred the carefree life without a child. Finally, on a single officer’s orders, Christine is arrested, and bound, and taken to an insane asylum and told that she will remain there, undergoing electric shock therapy, until she recants and signs a confession, admitting that the child is hers.

Well, that much of the story is fairly well known; sadly, it’s historical fact. These events really did happen, shockingly enough. And as I said, I haven’t ruined the story for you because it just gets stranger and more horrible. And by the way, we can be proud of the once-famous Rev. Gustav Briegleb, the real life Presbyterian pastor who acted as one of the story’s several heroes, using his weekly radio show to stir up public outrage against the way Christine was being treated. But the fact of the story that I most want to focus on is this: It is impossible to manufacture belief.

You can want with all your heart to believe something. You can sit up late into the night telling yourself that the thing is true. You can write the thing out neatly on post-it notes and attach them to your bathroom mirror, so that you read it every time you brush your teeth...which, of course, is after every meal. You can surround yourself with people who believe that thing. You can spend long hours pouring over the reasons why the thing ought to be true. But nothing will make you believe it...unless you just believe it. You cannot manufacture belief. Belief comes from someplace else, a place that you trust instinctively. Belief, it could be said, comes from outside of you.

Jesus says to old Nicodemus in today’s gospel reading, “God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” It’s perhaps the most familiar verse in all the Scriptures...urging us to believe. But where does that belief come from? You cannot manufacture belief, but don’t worry; you don’t have to.

Did you learn this verse, John 3:16, in Sunday school class? At VBS as a child? In my experience, there are two kinds of churches in this world: there are the John 3:16 churches which tend to emphasize evangelism and personal conversion experiences; then there are the Micah 6:8 churches, which emphasize social responsibility and justice. And what does Micah 6:8 say? “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” I’ve known very few churches that succeed at being both. But once every three years in Lent, we get John 3:16.

“God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Actually, if I had my way, we would never see John 3:16 apart from its neighbor, John 3:17. “For God sent not the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” But today we dwell on John 3:16. If everything depends on our belief, then what about those folks who want to believe, but can’t? What about those (perhaps most of us) who believe...on our good days, but on other days, not as much? Well let me tell you something about John 3:16. When I publish my personal translation of the Bible, John 3:16 is going to sound like this: God loved the world so much that God gave God’s only Son, so that whoever trusts in him should not come to nothing, but have life without measure. (I can’t wait to see that on cardboard signs at Steelers’ games.) For you see, the word “belief” in our day and age has come to mean, “to accept something as fact, to subscribe to a truth claim.” But in the old Greek language that the gospel writer John was using, the word is better translated very simply as “trust.” Just trust. God loved the world so much that God gave God’s only Son, so that whoever trusts in him should not come to nothing, but have life without measure. You don’t have to make yourself believe anything. The life of faith is more a matter of trust.

Now admittedly, you can’t exactly manufacture trust either. You’ve surely heard the story about the guy who was hiking in the mountains and slipped over the edge of a cliff. He dropped in a complete freefall for about twenty feet, with another hundred or so to go, when he managed to grab a sapling growing on the side of the cliff. In desperation, he clung to the tiny tree, and he shouted up toward the path that he’d just left, “Is there anybody up there?” No answer came. He felt the tree roots starting to come loose, and his hands growing weary, so he began to pray, “God, please save me! I’ll do anything you want.” And again he yelled, “Is there anybody up there.” Suddenly, the clouds parted. A ray of light touched him. And a voice from heaven said, “I have heard your cries. Now have faith in me, and do as I say. Let go of the sapling.” The man shouted, “Is there anybody *else* up there?” It’s true that you can’t just make yourself trust, just as you cannot manufacture belief, but consider the difference it makes when you replace the word “believe” with the word “trust.”

Well, let’s try it with the Apostles’ Creed, which was first written in ancient Greek, just like John 3:16. Instead of saying, “I believe in God the Father Almighty,” say, “I trust in God the Father Almighty.” When you say “believe” it sounds like you have it all figured out. But when you say “trust,” as in “I trust in God the Father Almighty,” it has a completely different ring to it. When you say “trust,” it seems to say, “I may not completely understand God. I may live with some questions about who God is and why God allows some of the things that God allows. I may still wonder why I had to go bald while my brothers all kept their hair. But I trust. I trust that God, whatever exactly God is, is good. I trust that God loves, that God does not condemn.”

Believe / trust...so why the word study? What does it matter? It matters because there comes a time in your life when you want with all your heart to believe something, just like Christine, in “The Changeling,” wanted to believe that some strange boy was her son. You’ll want to believe something because it’s a beautiful thing that ought to be true, if it’s not. It’s a comforting thing, which—if you believed it—could give you solace and joy. But the hard statements of belief will fail you from time to time, and when they do, it doesn’t need to be the end of your faith. If your faith is built more on trust than on

belief, then you won't be scared of living with some uncertainties. Belief is a good thing, but trust is better. Trust is about relationship; belief is about intellectual acceptance. I will go so far as to say that there is more of God in the questions than in the answers, because the questions mean that your spiritual journey is a relationship, a give-and-take, an ongoing conversation, for conversation is the stuff of healthy relationships. There is more faith in the quest than in the destination, because the quest means that your faith is alive and, like all living organisms, it is changing. There is more life in the seeking than in the knowing, more wonder, more beauty in the trusting than in the believing. The day is surely coming when you will look at some hard article of faith, and you'll want to believe it. You'll look at some truth claim about God, or the Bible, or the afterlife, and you'll want to make yourself believe it because you know you're supposed to believe it. But you won't be able to. You'll be like the man I knew in my church in Oklahoma City who crossed his fingers whenever we recited the Apostles' Creed and came to the part that said, "He was born of the virgin, Mary." You cannot manufacture belief. But trust comes pretty naturally to many of us. We've suffered, yes, but most of us have always had everything we need. We have people who love us, fully stocked kitchens, clean water to drink. We have rights, and access to medical care. We have achievements, and good memories, and life-affirming pastimes. What's not to trust? Even when belief is scarce, we have much reason to live in the trust that God is good, that things will be okay, no matter what happens, that in the end, well, our life is still in the hands of the One who gave us our beginning. Trust. It's about relationship.

God loved the world so much that God gave God's only Son, so that whoever trusts in him should not come to nothing, but have life without measure. You don't have to make yourself believe anything. Just live a life of trust. Amen.