God So Loved the World — But Which World Are We Saving?

Liberation • Prophetic Imagination

John 3:16-21 • Mixed congregation

Naming Reality: The Gospel We Have Domesticated

There is a gospel being preached in our time. You have heard it. You may have believed it. It goes like this: God so loved the world that whoever believes the right things, prays the right prayer, and attends the right services shall not perish but have eternal life. It is a gospel perfectly fitted for empire — personal, private, portable, and above all, safe. It asks nothing of Caesar. It disturbs no boardroom. It leaves the structures of domination exactly as it found them.

Walter Brueggemann calls it the royal consciousness — the slow numbing of our moral imagination by the powers that be. We have been taught to read John 3:16 as a cosmic insurance policy, a transaction between a sovereign God and an individual soul, disconnected from history, from poverty, from the crucified peoples of the earth. We have been taught to spiritualize what is political, to internalize what is structural, to make private what God declared public.

Global capitalism is the dominant reality today. It tells us that the world is a market, that human beings are consumers, that suffering is an individual problem requiring an individual solution. It produces, as Brueggemann says, numbness — a managed despair in which we cannot feel our own pain, let alone the pain of our neighbors. We scroll past images of children in refugee camps. We drive past tent cities on the way to church. We read John 3:16 on stadium banners while millions live without clean water, without medicine, without dignity.

This is the royal consciousness. It takes the most explosive verse in Scripture — 'God so loved the world' — and shrinks it to a bumper sticker. It takes the dangerous memory of a God who heard the cry of enslaved Israelites and came down to liberate them, and turns it into a therapy session for the comfortable. The text does not allow this. The word for 'world' here is kosmos — the entire created order, including its structures, its systems, its principalities and powers. God did not so love only the souls of the world. God so loved the world.

John 3:16, John 3:17, Exodus 3:7-8

> **Illustration: The Stadium Banner and the Slum**
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> In São Paulo, Brazil, a massive stadium hosts tens of thousands of fans every weekend. The highway leading to it passes directly through one of the city's largest favelas — a neighborhood of corrugated iron roofs, raw sewage, and extraordinary human resilience. For years, the city government erected large advertising panels along the highway — not to improve conditions in the favela, but to block the view of the favela from the highway. Gustavo Gutierrez asked: Who gets to decide what is visible? Who gets to decide what the world looks like? Liberation theology is, at its most basic, the refusal to let the panels stand.
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> *Source: Inspired by Gustavo Gutierrez, 'A Theology of Liberation'*

Prophetic Critique: Grieving the Gospel We Have Lost

Now we must grieve. The prophet does not scold — the prophet weeps. Jeremiah wept over Jerusalem. Jesus wept over Lazarus. Oscar Romero wept at every funeral of every campesino murdered for organizing a cooperative. We are not here to condemn. We are here to lament what has been stolen from us — a gospel large enough to contain the suffering of the world.

Listen to what the text actually says. 'For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.' Saved. The Greek word is sozo — it means healed, made whole, delivered, rescued. It is the word used when Jesus heals the sick, when he raises the dead, when he tells the woman bent double for eighteen years to stand up straight. Salvation in John's gospel is not merely a forensic transaction. It is integral liberation — the restoration of full humanity to those from whom humanity has been taken.

And yet we have built a Christianity that has been, in the words of Leonardo Boff, 'a chaplain to the status quo.' We have blessed the conquests. We have anointed the kings. We have told the poor that their poverty is providence, that their suffering is sanctifying, that their reward is in heaven — while those who crushed them built cathedrals with the money taken from their labor. This is structural sin. It is not the sin of a single bad actor. It is sin baked into systems — into land ownership patterns that starve farmers, into healthcare markets that let children die of preventable disease, into criminal justice systems that incarcerate the poor for what the wealthy do with impunity.

John writes that 'people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.' We have read this as a referendum on individual morality. But the darkness John describes is the darkness of a system that hides its violence — that buries the evidence, that silences the prophets, that kills the Archbishop while he stands at the altar. Archbishop Romero was shot through the heart while celebrating Mass. His crime was reading the gospel from below — from the perspective of the crucified peoples of El Salvador. He named the darkness. He named the death squads. He named the structural sin. And the darkness killed him.

That is the gospel we have suppressed. Not the cozy gospel of personal peace and private salvation, but the dangerous memory of a God who takes sides — who hears the cry of the oppressed, who comes down into history, and who sends prophets and martyrs to tell the truth about the darkness. We grieve this loss. We grieve the churches that have become social clubs for the comfortable. We grieve the sermons that have nothing to say to those who are being crushed. We grieve the Christianity that has made its peace with empire, that has chosen the light of chandeliers over the light of the world.

John 3:17-20, Luke 4:18-19, Amos 5:21-24

> **Illustration: Romero's Final Homily**
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> On March 23, 1980, the day before he was assassinated, Archbishop Oscar Romero preached his most dangerous sermon. He addressed the soldiers and military directly: 'No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose screams rise to heaven, I beg you, I implore you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!' The next day, a bullet fired by agents of the state silenced his voice. But his martyrdom became — as all martyrdom does in liberation theology — a seed. The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church. The darkness thought it had won. It had not reckoned with resurrection.
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> *Source: Oscar Romero, Final Homily, March 23, 1980*

Imaginative Alternative: The World God Actually Loves

But now — now — we must speak a different world into being. This is the prophet's other task. Not only to name the darkness, but to light a candle. Not only to grieve what is lost, but to envision what God is building. And what God is building is astonishing.

Imagine a community — small, maybe twenty people — gathered in a cinder-block room in a neighborhood the city has forgotten. They have a Bible, some bread, and each other. They read John 3:16 together. But they do not read it alone, in their heads, as isolated consumers of spiritual content. They read it from below — from their social location, from their experience of being poor and brown and invisible to the structures of power. And when they read 'God so loved the world,' something breaks open. Because they know — from their bodies, from their hunger, from their children's fevers — that they are the world. They are the kosmos God loves. Not in spite of their poverty. Not after their poverty is cleaned up. Now. As they are. God loves this.

This is the base ecclesial community — the comunidad de base — that Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff describe. It is not a program. It is not a ministry initiative. It is the church being the church: reading Scripture, analyzing social reality, and taking action together. This is what John's gospel calls 'living in the light.' Not a private spiritual glow, but a communal practice of truth-telling and solidarity. 'Those who do what is true come to the light.' Notice — they do what is true. Orthopraxy before orthodoxy. Right action before right doctrine.

Now imagine further. Imagine the reign of God breaking in — not as an otherworldly escape from history but as a concrete alternative within it. Imagine communities where the land belongs to those who work it. Imagine neighborhoods where healthcare is a sacrament, not a commodity. Imagine churches where the first question asked of a new member is not 'What do you believe?' but 'Who among you is suffering, and how can we walk alongside them?' This is accompaniment — the liberation theology practice of being present with the poor, not managing them from a distance, not solving them as a problem, but walking with them as companions.

John 3:17 says God did not send the Son to condemn but to save. The reign of God is not a courtroom verdict. It is a new creation breaking through the old one — like grass through concrete, like resurrection through death, like light through the cracks of a world that has tried very hard to stay dark. Conscientization — the awakening of critical consciousness that Paulo Freire and the liberationists describe — this is what happens when people who have been told they do not matter begin to read the Bible and find that God has been on their side all along. That is not a small thing. That is a revolution of the imagination.

The imaginative alternative John offers is not pie in the sky. It is not a promise deferred until death. It is the Kingdom of God as justice — arriving, pressing in, calling us to participate. Walter Brueggemann says the preacher's job is to 'outnarrate the empire.' Here is our counter-narrative: God so loved the world — the actual world, with its favelas and refugee camps and undocumented workers and incarcerated youth and grieving mothers — that God sent the Son not to condemn this world but to heal it, to liberate it, to make it whole.

John 3:16-17, John 3:21, Isaiah 65:17-25, Revelation 21:1-5

Illustration: The Light That Cannot Be Hidden

In the aftermath of the Salvadoran civil war, communities that had formed around the base ecclesial community model began doing something remarkable: they started building. Schools. Clinics. Water cooperatives. Not waiting for the government. Not waiting for an NGO. Reading the gospel, analyzing their reality, and acting. One community in Morazán, whose village had been burned to the ground during the war, rebuilt their church first — then their school. They said: 'We rebuild because God so loved this world, and God's love must be made visible in cement and in children learning to read.' That is integral liberation. That is the Kingdom of God as justice, arriving in the form of a rebuilt school in a burned village.

Source: Adapted from accounts documented in 'The Preferential Option for the Poor' — Jon Sobrino

Call to Faithful Action: The Praxis of the Light

We cannot leave this text without the question that liberation theology always asks: So what do we do? Praxis — the insistence that reflection and action are inseparable — is not optional in this tradition. Gustavo Gutierrez said that the first act is commitment to liberation, and theology is the second act. So here is your first act. Here is ours together.

First: know your social location. Before you can read the gospel from below, you must know where you are standing. Are you reading John 3:16 as someone with health insurance, stable housing, a passport that opens doors? Then you are reading it from above. This is not a condemnation. It is an invitation — to conscientization, to the awakening of your own complicity in structural sin, and to the choice to reposition yourself alongside the poor. This congregation does not have to be poor to make the preferential option for the poor. It has to choose it.

Second: build base communities. Form small groups — not small groups for Bible study that end in prayer and return to business as usual, but comunidades de base that read Scripture, analyze their neighborhood's concrete reality, and act together. Who is being crushed in your ZIP code? Where is the structural sin operating closest to your front door? Begin there. This is the orthopraxy John calls 'doing what is true.'

Third: practice accompaniment. Find one person, one family, one community on the margins of this city, and walk with them. Not with a program. Not with a check. With your presence, your time, your voice at the city council meeting, your body in the line at the immigration hearing. Liberation theology insists that solidarity is not charity — charity maintains distance. Solidarity crosses it.

Fourth: name the darkness. This is prophetic witness. When structural sin operates in your city — when housing policy displaces the poor, when wage theft goes unprosecuted, when children in underfunded schools are written off — say so. Name it. By name. In public. This is what the martyrs did. This is what the light does: it exposes what the darkness has been hiding.

God so loved the world. Not a manageable piece of it. Not the comfortable part. The whole kosmos — in its suffering and its beauty, in its crucified peoples and its stubborn hope. That love is not an idea. It is a practice. It is a life. Go live it.

John 3:21, Micah 6:8, James 2:14-17

Illustration: The Option Made Concrete

When Bishop Samuel Ruiz García of Chiapas, Mexico was asked why he had dedicated his life to the indigenous poor of his diocese, he said simply: 'I did not choose them. God chose them first, and then invited me to join.' That is the preferential option for the poor distilled to its essence. It is not a political program. It is an RSVP to an invitation God has already sent. The question is not whether we agree with

the theology. The question is whether we will show up.

Source: Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas

Applications

• Form or join a base community group that reads Scripture together and connects biblical themes to a concrete local justice issue — housing, immigration, wage equity, or school funding in your neighborhood.
• Conduct a social analysis audit of your congregation: Who is present? Who is absent? What structural barriers prevent the poor from participating in your church's community? Bring the findings to leadership.
• Practice accompaniment this week: identify one person or family navigating an unjust system and offer your concrete presence — not money, not a program, but your time and your body alongside theirs.
• Name one instance of structural sin in your community publicly — in a letter to an elected official, at a community meeting, or in a conversation with a neighbor — as an act of prophetic witness.
• Read the gospel this week from a different social location: find and read a commentary or reflection on John 3:16-21 written by a theologian from the Global South, a person of color, or someone with lived experience of poverty.
• Ask your congregation to commit to a 'preferential option practice' for the next month: each member identifies one structural injustice affecting their neighbors and takes one concrete action toward addressing its root causes.

Prayer Suggestions

• Pray for conscientization — that God would awaken our congregation's awareness of the structural sins we participate in, often unknowingly, and give us courage to face what we see.
• Pray by name for the crucified peoples of your city and world: the undocumented worker, the incarcerated young person, the family facing eviction, the child in an underfunded school. Let their reality enter your prayer.
• Pray for the martyrs and prophets who gave their lives for this gospel of liberation — Oscar Romero, the UCA Jesuits, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr. — and for the courage to carry their witness forward.
• Pray for your congregation's praxis — that your faith would be translated into action, that your orthodoxy would be matched by orthopraxy, and that your community would be known by what you do, not only what you believe.
• Pray for the base communities, the organizers, the advocates, and the accompaniers in your city — that they would be sustained, that they would know they are not alone, and that God's reign of justice would break through in their work.
• Close with a prayer of commitment: 'Lord, we receive your love for the whole world. We choose to love what you love. Send us into the world — the actual world — not to condemn it, but to participate in its liberation. Amen.'