

The beginner's Gospel (John 3:14-21)

Look, people are sinking under the waters. Here in this wilderness, people are perishing.

by [John K. Stendahl](#) in the [March 10, 2009](#) issue

Some years back, I was surprised to hear John called the beginner's Gospel. Surely the Gospel to begin with was Mark, the shortest and most likely the oldest, or maybe Luke, with all those wonderful stories. But John, the most different one, seemed to me a decidedly second-semester topic, if not a graduate-level course. I saw it as an astonishing theological elaboration and re-presentation of the person of Jesus of Nazareth seen in the other books, and therefore the testimony of those sources needed to be heard first, before John's majestically self-describing Christ could be understood.

There was an additional reason that I thought it a mistake to hand the fourth Gospel over to "baby Christians." I thought the book dangerous, too easily taken not only as a presentation of a docetically superhuman Jesus but also as an endorsement of arrogant dualisms. It wasn't just the anti-Judaic passages but also the polarities which inform its invective: the view of the world as divided between the children of light and the children of darkness, those who have the truth and those who belong to the father of lies.

I loved much about John—the sinuous caressing of its language, the Christ who tells me who he is for me, the wonderfully human moments and much else. But surely, I thought, this confident vision of absolute distinctions should not be in the first set of lessons for neophyte believers or for those who desire to believe. These words need tempering by gentler counsels, by Jesus' teachings of humility, forbearance and reconciliation. Let those disciplines be learned first, and only then entrust these stark and dangerous dualities.

So I thought until I considered what a parishioner told me about this beginner's Gospel notion. She had come to her Christianity during a tumultuous and confusing adolescence. In a dangerous and chaotic place, she had found an evangelical

fellowship and been able to make sense of her existence. Her life had been saved, metaphorically and possibly literally.

These remarks locate me in a strain of the Christian tradition that values the paradoxical *and* over the exclusivist *or*. The gospel graces us for choices and solidarities amid shades of gray. Our Christ calls us to maturity, and we know the damage simplistic certitudes can do.

But my parishioner's life challenged me to see something other than this fine wisdom. She had been sinking, and someone had thrown her a lifeline. Sometimes that's what it's about: life or death, light or darkness, yes or no. Drowning and going down for the third time, you either grab the lifeline or not. You take that drink or not, put the needle in your arm or not, despair or hope, lie or speak the truth. No shades of gray.

"God so loved the world . . ." The familiar words hold a driving passion for this creation, a love at odds with the contempt suggested by too much evangelical apocalyptic. Where that love drives, however, is to this urgency: "that whoever believes in him should not perish." We misunderstand the text if we think it only about otherworldly damnation or salvation when we die. Look, people are sinking under the waters. Here in this wilderness, people are perishing. The snakes are biting still, all sorts of venom claiming human lives.

Throw out the lifeline to the drowning. Lift up the cross, like that serpent in the wilderness, that the snake-bitten may lift their eyes to its hope and healing. Let them know that there is a rescue, that there is life, abiding and abundant life, and that they can lay hold of it.

This is a strongly binary rhetoric, a dualism for decision. It does come with dangers, but it can also be empowering and saving. Not everyone comes to a Christian identity through the kind of crisis to which such words speak. Not all of us came to know Jesus first as the one who rescued us from addiction or obsession or abuse, from drift or from despair. But many did, many do and many will. And many need to. It is not surprising that the so-called evangelical wing of American Christianity has been the more proficient in such rescues. And for those pulled from the waters or restored in the desert, John would naturally be the beginner's Gospel: it tells of where they begin. When they were sinking, the lifeline came as the absolute distinction between life and death.

I am grateful to have a theological tradition that knows about ambiguity and complexity and opens to a sense of more to be learned. By itself this Johannine rhetoric can wreak harm. But so can our sophistication when it means failure to speak the clear word of choice when it is needed, the word of life. When I read this Gospel again and think of the many who are perishing, I covet for my own tradition a more adept and rescuing use of the word, a readier casting of the lifeline.