March 14, Lent 4B (John 3:14-21)

I have a complicated relationship with John 3:16.

by Kerry Hasler-Brooks in the February 24, 2021 issue

The words of John 3:16 are deep in me. I have no memory of learning them and can go years without reading or reciting them, and yet, in a moment, they are in my breath and on my lips, rising from that deep place: “For God so loved the world.”

I remember hearing this verse in my mother’s voice as we practiced memory verses after church. My mother carries her faith like a mantle. She has, at times, carried my faith as well, praying when I could not, confessing when I would not, whispering the promise of God’s love when I could not see, hear, or feel that promise myself.

John 3:16 came of age, as I did, in the American evangelicalism of the ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s. The verse played a quiet role in the global church until the Second Great Awakening in the United States, and it was not until the evangelical wave of the late 20th century that it became the singular words of the gospel in American life. Billy Graham recited the verse at crusades attended by thousands, who were often gifted copies of John’s Gospel. Sports fans were broadcast across the United States wearing shirts and carrying signs to games emblazoned simply with “John 3:16.” This is the John 3:16 I inherited, the celebrity verse that roared through American stadiums—football games and revivals alike—and the quiet verse whispered by my mother in my childhood bedroom with the paper doll wallpaper.

The verse’s words are, in a way, lonely ones, read and recited most often on their own, broken away from the chapter and the Gospel where they live. I rediscover Nicodemus each time I read John 3 in its entirety, surprised again to find that the verse, my verse, belonged first to this ancient Pharisee. It is Christ’s answer to his simple, wondering question: “How can these things be?” (v. 9). I forget that this all-American verse was born in an ancient world and has lived in the mouths of millions these last thousands of years. I forget that these words aren’t mine alone.

Perhaps this should have been obvious. The verse carries a big promise, not a private one. A promise, as it says quite clearly, for the world. But the mythical

individualism of my childhood faith, which rested exclusively on the idea of a personal relationship with Christ, wrapped itself around this verse. Right now, in this time of social distancing, as I long to wrap my arms around my sister or to share a meal at a table filled with friends or to smile at a stranger in the store and see them smile back, I am desperate to look up from the words on the page. I am desperate not for the words tucked in the private recesses of my heart but for the people who carry these words as I do. I cling not only to the promise of love written into the verse but to the promise that I am not reading alone.

The familiarity of John 3:16 now makes me uncomfortable. The verse seems flung about too easily on yard signs in my rural Pennsylvania neighborhood, Christian T-shirts worn on my college campus, shabby chic décor on the cover of some home magazine beloved by Christian folks. My progressivism—shrouded too often in elitism—can't stand for such casual proclamations of faith. But when I do look up from all the uncomfortable packaging of this familiar verse, when I look to wise readers of the sacred text, I come face to face with a radical message written into John 3:16.

In September 1954, a young Martin Luther King Jr. moved from Boston to Montgomery, the city that would call him from the pulpit to the street, that would cement his call to follow Jesus into the work of justice. His first week in the pulpit at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, King preached on John 3:16. That first sermon in his new home bears signs of the voice that one year later would be heard all over the globe—of the man who would stand on the shoulders of Claudette Colvin, Rosa Parks, Jo Ann Robinson, and thousands of other Black women to lead the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956 that would help change the world.

"God's love has breadth," said King. "It is a big love; it's a broad love. . . . God's love is too big to be limited to a particular race. It is too big to be wrapped in a particularistic garment. It is too great to be encompassed by any single nation. God is a universal God." In that Montgomery church, King told a different story of the God of this verse. He leaned into it as a source of politically activated theology: "This [unlimited love] has been a ray of hope and has given a sense of belonging to the hundreds of disinherited people" who proclaim, like the enslaved preacher who risked everything to teach his enslaved congregants in the shadows of the plantation, "You ain't no slave. . . . But you're God's child."

For much of my life, I did not know that the John 3:16 of King's sermon existed. His words have now made this familiar verse into a renewed cry for God's great love, a

love big enough and vast enough to be for me and for the whole of the world.