

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, March 12, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; John 3:1-17
“That the world might be saved”

For God so loved the world. . .

From the first moment when God began the work of creation, to the history of the people of Israel, to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God’s people and in the life of the world, God’s all-powerful love has been active.

God’s all-powerful love has been building and is still building God’s kingdom of righteousness and peace and joy. God’s all-powerful love has been active and will remain active until we see God’s kingdom finally established. And nothing can stand against the redemptive power of God’s all-powerful love to draw all people in, people of any faith and of no faith.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe that there is no more powerful thing in God’s creation than God’s love.

. . . so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Rob Bell was the founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan. He served the congregation from 1999 till 2012. During that time, he became one of the most prominent leaders in the evangelical wing of the church, through his preaching, teaching, writing, speaking and film-making. In 2011, he set the liberal cat among the evangelical pigeons with his book, *Love Wins – A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. He opens with this story:

Several years ago, we had an art show at our church. I had been giving a series of teachings on peacemaking, and we invited artists to display their paintings, poems, and sculptures that reflected their understanding of what it means to be a peacemaker. One woman included in her work a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, which a number

of people found quite compelling.

But not everyone.

Someone attached a piece of paper to it.

On the piece of paper was written: “Reality check: he’s in hell.”

Love Wins is Bell’s appeal for what he calls “a more forgiving faith” than the position that he had held up to that point. This actually led to his leaving the church he had spent most of his adult life serving, and to his being rejected by the evangelical wing of the church. The book presents a case for an understanding of the grace and love of God that is far more powerful and far more inclusive than we can even begin to imagine. In the final chapter, he writes:

I believe that the indestructible love of God is an unfolding, dynamic reality and that every single one of us is endlessly being invited to trust, accept, believe, embrace, and experience it. Whatever words you find helpful for describing this act of trust, Jesus invites us to say yes to this love of God again and again and again.

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Diana Butler Bass is an American Episcopalian church historian, whose work I enjoy and whom I have quoted before. In her book, *Strength for the Journey - a Pilgrimage of Faith in Community*, she tells a story of a confrontation in the early 1980s between a group of Episcopalians and a recently appointed bishop who was regarded as being dangerously liberal. This is what she writes.

The parish hall was full. Other local congregations sent representatives, but most people were from (my church). The bishop told a number of stories about settling in to the diocese - and some amusing anecdotes about feeling culture shock in New England. He expressed some of his hopes for the diocese and talked of renovating the cathedral centre. He made some vague theological statements about inclusion and openness. Finally, he asked for questions.

(One woman) raised her hand. Smiling, Bishop Johnson called on her. Clearly, he did not expect what followed. For the next ten minutes, the two had a heated exchange about moral issues. Johnson argued that women's ordination and homosexuality were complex issues and that the church had to carefully consider its theological position on such things. The woman was not satisfied. 'What about the church's moral authority?' she protested. 'The church must be clear on these issues. What about the Ten Commandments? Are we to teach our children that they are merely suggestions, just guidelines? You can't do that. You have to teach children the rules.'

Johnson tried to dodge direct theological questions. But the inquisition continued, and that strategy became impossible. A number of parishioners quizzed him on his position regarding controversial issues and theology. They did not like his answers . . . Then Buck raised his hand.

'Bishop Johnson,' he began. 'It says in the book of Timothy that the bishop is to guard the gospel. Sir, listening to you, I cannot discern what you are guarding. Can you tell us, please, exactly what you think the gospel is?'

I was shaking uncontrollably, and deeply embarrassed by this doctrinal exam. Not a person moved. If the bishop thought the question inappropriate, he did not let on.

Instead, he leaned back against the podium, looked first at Buck, and then, slowly, cast his gaze around the entire room. He unfolded his arms – which he had held across his chest – and stretched them out so widely that he almost looked like Jesus hanging on the cross. 'God,' he said deliberately, 'God loves everybody.'

'Well, yes,' Buck started to protest, 'but . . .'

'God loves everybody,' the bishop repeated. 'That's it.'

‘But . . .’

‘God loves everybody.’

To this day, I am not sure what Buck expected. Did he want Bishop Johnson to recite the Apostles’ Creed? Some statement affirming the Trinity? A Bible verse? . . . I know, however, that he did not expect those three words: ‘God loves everybody.’ And I did not think anyone else expected it either.

The bishop was, of course, correct. This terse statement summed up Jesus’ message and the whole of biblical history. But it was not what the room wanted to hear . . .

But I heard it. Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, I knew that that squishy liberal bishop was right and I was wrong. God really did love everybody - including all the people I thought were excluded from the reach of the Gospel. I had limited God’s mercy . . . The bishop said no. No limits. God loves everybody. God’s love is as vast as the universe and as difficult to comprehend as eternity itself. God’s only boundary is love.

John 3:16-17: ¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.