

*For God so loved...a statement so well known and loved by Christians, is mostly for the contemporary reader a mystical expression written in and for those who in ancient times lived a style of faith that understood God to be very closely present. For the progressive minded Christian John's gospel can help us see how complex the first few centuries were for those who tried to make sense of religion and how the divine is active in their lives.  
Maybe it can do that for us today.*

For 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.

How many times have we heard this?

What does it possibly mean?

If a storyteller were trying to tell us how deeply he believed God is there in us  
perhaps he might tell us that God was like a father – a parent -  
who loved something so much that he was willing to give up – indeed sacrifice a child  
for that thing that was loved so deeply.

Perhaps they would use the image of a father and a son.

Somehow this is not comforting to me. Is it that I don't want to be loved that much?  
I don't want to answer to such a responsibility to live up to being the recipient of such sacrifice?

Or, is it a sacrifice that is too dreadful for me to think about? Both

But then – you see the pattern was there – the storytelling model.

Abraham had been asked to sacrifice a son – to kill the son to show faith in God.

Greek mythology was rife with child abuse and sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

So the idea may seem extreme and awful to us – but it was not to ancient peoples.

For there to be early stories of child sacrifice –  
just helped to fit these biblical narratives into the literature of the age – or previous ages.

It must have been a real shift for the early Jewish writing – the Torah -  
to have a story that changed the plot – and the child was not killed – thrown out of heaven.

But for a God to love so much – rather than be jealous or hate – or be filled with rage  
as the Greek deities commonly did – there was a shift also.

If it was a literary element – it was changed.

Important stories are changed to fit the culture in which they exist.  
The gospel writers were writing to new audiences in first century Judaism.

When the writer of John wrote to those more mystical Jews and even Greeks who had not lived their lives in relation to synagogue and teachings of the Jewish world - he brought in themes to which they could relate.

There were those who believed God could be experienced.

We would call that mystical – although that was not a word used back then. Evidence of these groups are found in many places like Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

There were many Jews and early Christians who believed that God can be experienced immediately – not after death – that the boundary between heaven and earth can be crossed - as a part of religious activity.

Today – some groups within Christianity – are more oriented to presence and more aware - speak of it more than others. We might call them more charismatic – from those who might speak in tongues (so to speak) – we would call them Pentecostal.

Or it might be those for whom meditation is how they reach for and are ready for the presence of God. Conservative or liberal are not terms that would describe them – for they could be either. It is that belief that we can experience the sacred in the here and now.

It is something like prayer. Sabvrina Caldwell, a spiritual director, wrote a paper called “Being present to the presence” and it is about prayer.

She writes that the deepest form of prayer grows out of our intentional practice of praying.

When we do that – when we are in prayer or say a prayer-  
“we are living if only for a moment in awareness of God’s presence.”  
“We are living if only for a moment in awareness of God’s presence.”<sup>2</sup>

We all have difficulty praying at times.  
Sometimes our minds are restless and distracted,  
sometimes our words seem to bounce off the ceiling  
and sometimes we have doubts or bad attitudes that block our hearts.  
Too often we come to God only in times of crisis.  
Our prayers may consist of asking for things  
as if God were a McDonald’s drive-through – open 24/7 – to give us what we want.

Sometimes we are like the clergyman in the Monty Python sketch  
who goes on and on about how big God is.  
We offer hollow praises about divine virtues of God without thought or really being engaged.

How do we move beyond these barriers  
so that prayer may flow and so we can live being wake to the living God –  
so we can be presence to the presence?

Caldwell would tell us there are no blanket answers to that question.  
We all have our own unique relationship with God and a path to walk.

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<sup>1</sup> The Internet Journal of Forensic Science. ISSN 1540-2622.

<sup>2</sup> Caldwell, Sabrina, Presbyterian Record, March 1, 2004.