

The Gospel in a Magician's Hat

John 3:1–17

© 2026 Ray Friesen

Suppose – do some supposing with me

Use those imaginations Melanie told us about 2 weeks ago

Suppose this afternoon or sometime this week

you are having coffee or a meal with fellow residents at Riverview

or some other condo place

Somone comes over sits down and says:

Or suppose you go out for lunch after church today or later in the week

While chatting someone comes over because they have something

to ask you and you scooch over

Then they say:

Or suppose you are having a beer with the boys

or a glass of wine with the gals

or drinks with colleagues or friends

and someone comes over, asks if they can join you, you say Yes,

they grab a chair and say:

In all three scenarios, the question is the same:

Over the last couple of years that I have lived in SC,

I have on occasion heard people refer to
the Good News of Jesus Christ.

I heard you talking about having been in church on Sunday

So, I assume you are a Christian

What is the Good News of Jesus Christ?

How would you answer that question?

What would you say?

What is the Good News of Jesus Christ?

And then, before you have answered them, they say:

When you have answered my question, so that I can remember
what you said, can you summarize it for me

In 30 words or less, you know, kind of like an acronym,
but instead of 3 letters or 5 letters, you use 30 words or less
to create a sentence that has the words and/or phrases

I need to remember the essence of the Good News of Jesus.

What would you say?

And saying "Here's my cell, call Ray Friesen or Linda Stumpf
or Norma Hain or, after May 25, Kelly Osgood, is not an option.

All camping in various parts of the Rockies

Out of cell service range

How would you answer?

To help all of us together think about how we might answer that question,
Let me tell you a story.

God was troubled and it showed on God's face, on how God walked,
on God's silence up there in heaven.

Finally, one time when God and the angels were sitting around,
enjoying a glass of wine, one of the angels spoke up.

Yahweh, the angel said, is there something troubling you?

Do you want to share with us what the problem is?

At first, God was silent, looking down,
and the angels wondered if God was going to say anything
or had even heard.

Finally, God raised God's head looked around the circle sitting there,
together, and answered:

Yes, I am troubled, deeply troubled.

Frankly, to tell you the truthy (as if God would ever speak anything
but the truth),

I am overwhelmed with trouble.

Now the angels were really concerned.

“What is it? Another one asked.

My problem, the one that breaks my heart,

the one that makes it hard to think about anything else,

is that people are afraid of me. They’re scared.

They think I am some mean, angry God just waiting to catch them

doing something they think they shouldn’t

and when they are caught, they will faced full-on retribution.

They think—imagine this—that I will only love them if they measure up.

This has been going on for what passes for centuries down there

on Earth.

To try to sooth my anger, see if there is any hope for them at all,

they kill and burn goats, pour blood on their altars,

beg for mercy, and still they are afraid.

Now, to make things even worse,

there are those who are beginning to teach that I have created

a burning pit where a hot, hot fire burns without shedding any light

and people suffer terrible burns but never die.

Here, they insist, I will put people who do not measure up.

How could they think such stuff?

When I gave humans their brains & their hearts,

I thought I had created the best thing ever.

***Brains that could think my thoughts and
hearts that could love my love.***

Yet, when I see how they are being used,
I wonder where I messed up.

I mean, think of the utter foolishness they convince themselves of!

What can I do?

This must be stopped!

Somehow, I have to convince the people, all the people, every last one,
that I love them,

Love is who I am, and that unconditional love means I forgive.

How do I tell them to stop worrying they will lose my love

and rather be convinced of that and my boundless forgiveness,
and then live, not afraid of me but in love with me?

How, my angels, how?

Angels sat in stunned silence.

They had no idea how to respond to this.

If God couldn't figure it out, who could?

Suddenly a big smile broke out on God's face.

God jumped up and started to dance a little jig.

"I got it! I got it! I know exactly what I'll do!"

The angels looked at each other. As God danced a few more circles,

they were whispering to each other:

“Ask God.

No, you ask God.

No get Gabriel over there to ask God.”

Finally, God could keep it to Godself no longer.

“This is what I will do.

I will go down to earth and tell them and show them.

They will believe me if I tell them. They will have to.”

Now Gariel did speak up.

“Whoa Yahweh. Not so fast. You can’t do that!”

“What do you mean I can’t do that? I’m God. I can do anything.”

“Yeah, you can, but you can’t.”

What??

“you have the ability and power. However, imagine what would happen if you did.

Your brightness and your glory would burn out their eyeballs and fry their brain circuits.

You think their brains aren’t working now.

Imagine what they would be like after your glory fries all the circuits.

Then what?

God’s smile vanished.

God's dancing stopped.

In the excitement of a great idea, God had not considered that.

For being God, God sometimes seemed a little overeager
without thinking carefully.

Then the smile was back along with the twinkle in God's eyes.

"I will go visit the people as a human being.

I will enter human life just like everyone else—as a baby,

grow as a child and teenager, and then,

as an adult I will start telling the people

what it is I want them to know and especially,

tell them its not about following rules and burning goats

if they want to be who I made them to be.

It's love and forgiveness.

I'm all about love and forgiveness

and I want them to be all about love and forgiveness.

Imagine if they lose their fear and reject their judging and violence

and live that love and forgiveness.

It will be beautiful.

Just thinking about it, I can hardly take it.

The angels chuckled.

First God said God could do anything

and now God wasn't sure God could take it,
this beautiful new world.

Oh well, that was Yahweh God for you.

“While you are down there, who will deal with the Universe from up here?”

Michael asked.

“Look,” God replied. “

We've already decided that not all of me can show up down there.

People can't handle that.

Recall when Solomon built that wonderful temple

and I told the people I would have my Name life there?

As much of me as they could handle would live in that building.

Now, I will go as a human being.

I think I will call myself, I know, the Son of God.

That should work. My DNA, the essence of my being will be there

and I will still be God up here.”

The angels weren't sure if that made any sense

but it was worth a try, they figured.

If anyone could pull it off, God could.

Another angel spoke up: “You really think this will work, God?

The people will repent, change how they think

and be convinced you are only about love and forgiveness?”

A look of concentration formed on God’s face.

God thought for a while and then, in a much more sober voice, God said:

“No, I don’t think so. I will have to do one more thing.

The ***Religious Guardians*** and priests are not going to like

what I tell them.

They won’t like the idea that I tell them I love all people, not just them.

They won’t like the idea that it’s not about following all the rules

They have in place.

They won’t like the idea that they can stop all their rituals

to get my forgiveness.

With all that taken away, their power will be gone.

People don’t give up power easily.

And they need religion to have power.

The Romans will not like it any better.

Imagine if love and forgiveness caught on

and there was no longer any need to conquer people.

What if they all decided to simply love each other and live together

and create a world-wide community of love & forgiveness.

There goes Ceasar and his power and his elitism.

No need for soldiers and swords.

Nope, they won't like love and forgiveness any better

than the Religious Traditionalists.

To Roman Empire & its Ceasar

Love and forgiveness are treason.

Now that I think of it, God continued, here's what will happen.

The Religious Guardians and Roman rulers will collude together
and do to me what Romans do to all those who commit treason.

They crucify traitors.

And love and forgiveness are always treason

to traditional religion and Empire.

The Romans will kill me my crucifixion.

Now several angels spoke up, angrily.

"No way God. We will not let this happen.

The Heavenly Army will come down and rescue you.

Roman soldiers are no match for Angels and their swords!

"Whoa. Whoa. Now it was God stopping the angels.

"So you come down with swords and rescue me,

what happens to my message of love and forgiveness?

Shattered. Drenched in human blood. Obliterated.

Nope, I will have to suffer and die as a human.

As I hang there on the cross,

suffer with life slowly seeping out of me,

I will be there for all to see that I am serious.

You can do whatever you want to do to me,

I will not resort to vengeance, violence, and retribution.

I will always, only love and forgive.

The room was filled with silence. A holy hush.

They all knew this was the Truth. The Biggest Truth ever.

Then God added:

And if people will be willing to trust that, believe in that,

they will experience abundant life, life described as eternal life,

and life on earth will be transformed.,

There it is folks. As best as I can put it, the Good News of Jesus.

Problem is, that is slightly more than 30 words.

Can it be boiled down?

I think it can.

Pastor John certainly tried and when he put the summary of all that into his Good News Story Collection, writing in Greek, he used only 25:

*HOUTOS GAR AGAPESEN HO THEOS TON COSMON HOSTE TON
HUION ALUTONUMONGENEA EDOKEN HINA PAS HO PISTEUON
EIS AUTON MEA EPOAETHAI ALL ECHE ZOAE EIONION*

Anyone know if I pronounced any of those words correctly?

I was counting on that.

In English, the NRSV uses 27 words to translate Pastor John:

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.

There it is, the Good News of Jesus in 30 words or less

In the evangelical half of my tradition, it became known as
“The Gospel in a Nutshell”

I was attracted to that.

However, when I began doing more thorough work on the text 5 years ago

It seemed too confining. Locked in. Too small

And so, I chose a new label for it

“The Gospel in a Magician’s Hat.”

Yep, there it is, all neatly packaged in 25 to 27 words.

However, once you start pulling on the little bit of it that peaks out

The edge of a scarf

You find there is no end to that scarf.

Keep pulling and pulling till it is long enough
To wrap the entire world and its people in the warmth of
God's love and forgiveness.