

You might have noticed the signs sometimes held up in a crowd of spectators, the signs that simply say “John 3:16”. My Dad asked me once why would a person take a sign like that to a baseball or football game. I told him it’s because that one verse is the Gospel in a nutshell – and those people who hold those signs are trying to get that message out – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

It’s a great verse! It starts off with the truth that God so loves the world! God doesn’t love just religious people or Christians or 49’ers fans – he loves all the people of the world – even those who rebel against God and mock God’s followers. Romans 5:8 tells us, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God loved the world even before God sent Jesus into the world to give his life for us on the cross.

The emphasis on our passage this morning from John's Gospel is on the importance of belief. In the opening scene, a man named Nicodemus meets Jesus. We're told that Nicodemus is a Pharisee – that powerful group of religious experts who took it upon themselves to reform the Jewish faith. They were strict and taught that their devised traditions were equally as authoritative as the Law given to Moses. Not only was Nicodemus a Pharisee, but our text tells us he was a teacher and a leader of the Jews – possibly a member of the Jewish Ruling Council, the Sandedrin – a council of 70 elders. So Nicodemus was a well-known, educated and powerful man – a pillar of the community.

Nicodemus seems humble and open to truth. He is attracted to what Jesus is about, but he comes to him at night, probably because he doesn't want to be seen by the other religious leaders who might disapprove. Nicodemus admits that Jesus might actually be someone truly important: “we know that you are a teacher who has come from God;” – his affirmation of Jesus is based on signs Jesus has been performing – “for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

Jesus replies, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus doesn’t understand this at all! “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Logical questions. But for Jesus, being “born from above” – what some translations call being “born again” – isn’t at all about physical birth. It’s about entering the Kingdom of God – entering into a new reality – God’s rule on earth, beginning with the Incarnation: God coming among us in Jesus Christ.

Two things are needed to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus says – to be born of water and to be born of the Spirit. It’s not surprising that Nicodemus asks, “How can this be?” To be born of water alludes to physical birth in the breaking of the waters, the amniotic fluid of the womb – but in a religious sense, this is about the waters of baptism. And to be born of the Spirit takes things even deeper - it’s the beginning of spiritual awareness – and the continuing process of awakening to God.

Jesus connects being “born of the Spirit” to the wind – the Hebrew word for Spirit is *Ruach*, which also translates as wind. “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Jesus teases Nicodemus now: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” (I fear he would ask me something similar!) Jesus explains by referring to his identity as *the Son of Man* – a name Nicodemus would have known from the Scriptures as describing the promised Messiah in the book of the prophet Daniel.

And then, Jesus connects his death on the cross to the story of Moses and the serpent. Serpents or snakes have been symbolic for thousands of years in many cultures, usually as a symbol of evil. But this is a bit different. In the book of Numbers, chapter 21, we find the Israelites grumbling against Moses as they wandered in the wilderness because they didn’t trust him as a true prophet.

So as a punishment for grumbling, God sends upon their camp a whole heap of poisonous snakes. But God also gave Moses a remedy for the problem – a bronze serpent on a pole, held up high – those who looked to this serpent would live. The serpent was wrapped around the pole, a symbol that is still used today by the medical profession as a sign of their calling to heal and save lives. So the people of Israel were saved by keeping their eyes on that serpent that Moses lifted up:

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

And the way to eternal life is explained to Nicodemus through what is probably the most well-known and often-quoted verse in the whole Bible: John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

There's a story about an English man and his son, out for a walk at night during the darkest times of World War I – a conflict that took the lives of a shocking number of sons. The boy noticed that some of the houses had stars in the windows. The father explained, "That comes from this terrible war, laddie. It shows that these people have given a son." They walked a bit further, then the young boy stopped and pointed to the sky, where a bright evening star had appeared. He said, "Daddy, God must have given a Son, too." And that is it. In the terrible war against sin and evil, God gave his Son.

Whenever we hear of God's love in the New Testament, it almost invariably comes with the acknowledgement of Christ's atoning work on the cross. And today's gospel is an example of that. John writes in his first epistle, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world... He loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation [or atonement] for our sins."

It's powerful stuff: water and birth illustrating how spiritual transformation and renewal happen; wind illustrating how the Spirit moves in the world; raising the bronze snake symbolizing Jesus being lifted up on the cross as our healer and redeemer.

God *loves* the world – the entire human family – even in our sinful hostility to God and God's ways! The vastness of God's love is demonstrated in the gift of God's only Son – in the mission of Jesus and the giving up of his life through the cruelty of public crucifixion. Later in chapter 3, it says that the Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hands (3:35). “In this light, one might have expected here the thought that ‘God so loved the Son that he gave him the world.’ Instead, the startling force of this verse is that ‘God so loved the world, this alienated and undeserving world, that of his love he gave [his] only Son to die in order that such a world might live’” (A.T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St. John*). Left to themselves, the world perishes – but the result of the divine gift of the Son is the further gift of eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” And the invitation to believe this is always open to everyone. May we be humble and open to the truth as Nicodemus was, and unafraid to ask Jesus our questions, as we seek to know him and believe in him as our Savior. Amen.