

Title: Understanding the Uniqueness of Jesus: “Only Son of God”

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we give you thanks for your great love for us, a love that is beyond our understanding. May we reflect your love to the world around us and may that reflection transform our broken world into a world of love, through the gift of love divine given in the form of your only son, Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Let’s begin with a love story.

“Upon my bed at night  
I sought him whom my soul loves;  
I sought him, but found him not;  
I called him, but he gave no answer.<sup>a</sup>  
<sup>2</sup>I will rise now and go about the city,  
in the streets and in the squares;  
I will seek him whom my soul loves.’  
I sought him, but found him not.  
<sup>3</sup>The sentinels found me,  
as they went about in the city.  
‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?’  
<sup>4</sup>Scarcely had I passed them,  
when I found him whom my soul loves.  
I held him, and would not let him go  
until I brought him into my mother’s house,  
and into the chamber of her that conceived me.  
<sup>5</sup>I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
by the gazelles or the wild does:  
do not stir up or awaken love  
until it is ready!” (Song of Songs 3:1-5, NRSV)

How do we know when we are ready? If we wait for love until we are ready, does that mean we can stave off love or does that mean we have some kind of control over love? I think not. Love can sneak up on us. Love can come to us, ready or not.

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<sup>a</sup> Gk: Heb lacks this line

I will submit that love begins in the womb. Case number one: Isaiah says that God knew him in the womb. This is in the context of God's call to Isaiah as a prophet. There was a connection to God before Isaiah had a conscious mind. This might indicate that love is not a mind trip.

Case number two: There is currently an ad on TV where Jennifer *Love* Hewitt rubs her pregnant belly to sell a stretch mark product. But she also expresses her love for her baby before it is born.

I will now submit that the love we have for others is a small sample of the love that God has for us all. God's love is persistent. The story of God's persistence is called the Bible. It is a series of stories and writings that expresses God's desire for a loving relationship with us and our continual rejection of God. No matter how many times we reject God, God continues to reestablish that relationship.

The apex of that story, the apex of trying to cement that relationship is when God takes human form. God is willing to lower Godself into human form. How that works, we have no idea. Three of the gospel writers try to take stabs at it, with Mark being smart enough to not even try. As St. Paul writes in Philippians, "but (God) emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:7-8, NRSV)

Back in the seventies and eighties one person, in particular, and some others took it upon themselves to hold up a sign at televised sporting events. The sign read "John 3:16." We heard John 3:16 this morning, "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." This is John's version of saying what Paul wrote to the Philippians.

The phrase, only Son of God, vexed the church for centuries. The result was the first draft of the Nicene Creed written at the Council of Nicaea. The council of convened by the Emperor Constantine because there was so much conflict over the nature of Christ in the church and Constantine wanted a united church to sell to the empire. Christianity could not be the true religion of the empire if Christians couldn't even decide who Jesus was.

The controversy was about the origins of the only Son of God. Was Christ ever present before time or was there a time, even a split second of time, before the only Son of God existed? Parents exist before children, so it is reasonable to assume that the son came after the creator. The controversy was a splitting of hairs over how a Greek word was used, *homoousios*. *Homoousios* means the son is of the same being with God. *Homoiousios* means the son was similar to God. A one letter difference sent bishops into exile and death on both sides.

There are still Christian churches today that accept the latter interpretation of the nature of Christ. Of course, there are some that don't consider those church members to be true Christians. The Coptic Church of Egypt is one of those anti-Nicaean churches.

John is ambiguous on the point. Paul is explicit. For Paul, Jesus is fully God in human form.

Leaving the theology aside, let's get back to love. Paul is also saying that the Jesus event was an act of love. The way I see it is this way: God tried over and over again to bring humanity to Godself to only have humanity reject God and for the Jews to look inward, out of self-preservation, instead of bringing the world to Jerusalem where God dwelt. The world was one of rejection, of hate, of sin. God's goal was Eden, but we didn't want to go in.

After all else failed, God's solution was to take human form. Not only was it a humbling experience to be so limited in the flesh, but it also made God vulnerable to sin. Only if God could reject sin's temptations would God be able to break sin's hold on humanity and thus unite humanity to God. We heard that story of Jesus in the wilderness. None of this works unless Jesus is the only Son of God.

I think that the phrase, Son of God, was the best way for people to conceptualize what Paul said to the Philippians. Certainly, Son of God is much more succinct. But it also has baggage. There is an implication of a biological event that I think is unnecessary. Certainly, Jesus never came into existence without biology. Matthew and Luke ran with the biological issue. Mark ignored the whole thing. John took Jesus back in time as an actor in the creation of everything.

All four gospels say that Jesus received the Holy Spirit at his baptism. It was only after Jesus' baptism that he began his ministry. Somehow, somewhere Jesus became fully human and fully divine.

Paul said that God's humility came even to the point of death, even death on a cross. It is on the cross that John 3:16 becomes relevant. It was on a cross that the sins of the whole world were wiped away. It was on a cross that humanity became reconciled with God. Paul called our new status "heirs with Christ."

God, having taken on human form, assumed mortality of the flesh. Once Jesus was born, he was going die. Our bodies wear out and fail. Had Jesus died of old age, I don't think John 3:16 would have been written. Had Jesus died of old age, I don't think there would be a Christian religion, maybe a Jewish sect, but not a religion of its own. Had Jesus died of old age, the disciples would also have faded away in old age. If Jesus had died of old age, there would never have been a St. Paul. If Jesus had died of old age, there would be no churches to worship in.

I mentioned earlier that God wants us to be in Eden. Jesus emphasized that goal. Jesus called Eden the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. This Eden is to be where the first Eden was, on Earth. How that happens is up to us. We are to apply Jesus' teachings in how we live and treat one another. When violence, hatred, and malice are gone and peace and reconciliation reign, then Eden will return.

This is also the message of the prophets. The prophets oftentimes railed at the Hebrews to reform their ways and turn to God. The goal was well stated by Ezekiel, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances."

The story of the Son of God did not end on the cross. The last barrier between us and God was death. Our bodies will wear out and cease to be. For we are ash and to ash we will return. But Jesus broke the last barrier, giving eternal life. Only the Son of God could do such a thing. The only Son

of God, who took on flesh, was able exist after the flesh had died, thereby giving us entry to God's abode in eternal life.

“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.”

Text: **John 3:1–17** (NRSV)

**3** Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus<sup>a</sup> by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”<sup>b</sup> <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.<sup>c</sup> <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You<sup>d</sup> must be born from above.’<sup>e</sup> <sup>8</sup> The wind<sup>f</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup> “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you<sup>g</sup> do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.<sup>h</sup>

<sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>16</sup> “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.

<sup>17</sup> “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. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> Gk *him*

<sup>b</sup> Or *born anew*

<sup>c</sup> The same Greek word means both *wind* and *spirit*

<sup>d</sup> The Greek word for *you* here is plural

<sup>e</sup> Or *anew*

<sup>f</sup> The same Greek word means both *wind* and *spirit*

<sup>g</sup> The Greek word for *you* here and in verse 12 is plural

<sup>h</sup> Other ancient authorities add *who is in heaven*

<sup>i</sup> Some interpreters hold that the quotation concludes with verse 15

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Jn 3:1–17). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.