

March 20th, 2011
 Sermon for 2nd, Sunday in Lent
 St Peter Lutheran Church
 Bowie, TX
 Larry Knobloch, Pastor
 John 3:1-17

J. J.
 Jesu Juva
Jesus Help Me

John 3:1-17 (ESV)

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

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¹ *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001

Grace, Mercy, and Peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Amen.

There was a certain medieval monk who announced he would be preaching next Sunday evening on “The Love of God.” As the shadows fell and the light ceased to come in through the cathedral windows, the congregation gathered. In the dark chancel, the monk lighted a candle and carried it to the crucifix. First, he illumined the crown of thorns, next, the two wounded hands, then the marks of the spear wound. In the hush that fell, he blew out the candle and left the chancel. There was nothing else to say.

The love of God is the most amazing thing there is. The apostle Paul was so amazed by the love of God he writes: “[*Nothing*] in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). God’s love for us is higher, wider, and deeper than the universe. Simply put, God’s love is in a category by itself.

In today’s Gospel reading, we find the verse that is probably the most familiar verse in the Bible – John 3:16 – *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

Its often called “The Gospel in a Nutshell.” In just 24 words, we are told how great God’s love is, what His love motivated God to do, and why He did it. God’s love is so great that it extends to and covers the whole world – that’s you and me and everyone else past, present, and future.

God's great love motivated Him to offer up His one and only Son. God willingly gave Jesus as a sacrifice to save people from their sins.

And God did this so that we might be brought back from the punishment of hell and spend eternity with Him in heaven. It's not surprising that many adults and children claim this verse as their favorite.

In our text, we learn the situation that gave birth to this verse. Jesus was speaking with Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a high-ranking Pharisee. But instead of the close-minded attitude that most Pharisees had about Jesus, Nicodemus went to Jesus to find out exactly what Jesus was all about.

At the close of their short discussion, Jesus used these 24 words to explain God's plan for the salvation of mankind. And the explanation wasn't wasted on Nicodemus. Later, after Jesus had been crucified, it was Nicodemus who went with Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus. (John 19:39)

Some of you might be thinking that I'm preaching to the choir. You know all of this, right? Of course, you do. However, I have said all of this because I want you focused on this one verse – this "Gospel in a Nutshell." I want you to focus on John 3:16 so I can ask the question

"What if John 3:16 were not true?"

I would be willing to bet you have never considered that question. The implications are horrendous. It's even scary for me to even ask the question. John 3:16 is the very bedrock of our faith. However, even these 24 words can lose their impact if we don't stop and carefully examine them every now and then.

The first question is: What if God had not loved the world?

God's love is an act of God's will. A decision if you will. There is nothing about our sinful condition that would make God want to love us.

God loves us because He chooses to love us and no other reason. So we shouldn't take God's love for granted and we need to ask what if God had not chosen to love the world. Think about it, without the love of God for this world we would be missing something that human beings cannot live without – hope. What takes you from one day to the next – What takes you through the most difficult times in this life – What stops you from throwing in the towel and giving up on this world, yourself, and everyone around you – the certain hope in the knowledge that this is not all there is.

Without the hope which is conveyed by God's great love for us, there would be no reason to live. It's the hope we receive from God's unconditional love that gives purpose to our existence. People, who end their own lives on their own do so because they feel that all hope is gone. The saddest grief at any funeral is the grief of unbelievers who have no hope.

But rest assured, God does love the world. Everything in all of creation speaks of the love of God. Every flower, every sunrise, every sunset, every waterfall, every birth, every season speak of a loving God, who created a place of beauty for his beloved ones.

Most of all, the cross speaks of God's love for the world. Paul writes: *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8). God does love us and we have hope.

Our second question is: What if God had not given his Son?

God can love the world as much as He wants, but without the cross the love of God would be for naught. God said that the punishment of sin was everlasting torment in hell. God also said that sin would not just go away. The price of sin must be met and the price of sin is a perfect sacrifice. That price is beyond our reach.

Without the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, salvation would only be a dream that was never fulfilled. God set the price for sin and God Himself paid the price for sin. In the enormity of his love, God did for us what we could never do for ourselves. God gave us Jesus as the only way back to Him. God gave us Jesus so that through His perfect sacrifice, we might have God's grace.

The third question is: What if God's offer of salvation were not to the "whoever's?"
Whoever is a special word. It is both singular and plural. It can mean one person or everyone. John quotes Jesus as saying: "*whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" Paul writes: "*For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*" (Romans 10:13). This offer is for you, it's for me, and it's for everyone.

But what if God had not gone the "whoever" route? What would be the fate of the poor if God had only offered salvation to the rich? Or what about the rich if God only offered salvation to the poor? What if God had only offered salvation to the healthy or the educated? What if God had made salvation available only to people of a certain race or gender or age?

But that's not God's way. God's salvation is for whoever. God doesn't limit His love to people of specific qualities. After all, God isn't like you and me. God wants: "*All [people] to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth*" (1 Timothy 2:4). God's invitation is for everyone to believe and be saved. God's invitation is for whoever.

Our last question is: What if God's offer were not based on faith alone? If God's offer of salvation were not based solely on faith, we would still be in a sad state of affairs. Can you imagine working your whole life trying to please God, doing everything in your power to earn salvation, only to die and find that you didn't do enough?

Without God's provision of faith alone, that would be the fate of everyone. Scripture tells us that: "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23).

All the education in the world won't save your eternal soul. Neither will money, status, beauty, youth, popularity, or even leading a good life. Faith is all that is required to bring God's grace to you – and faith is the only thing that will bring God's grace to you.

But is faith enough? Paul told the Ephesian church: "*It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God*" (Ephesians 2:8). It was faith alone that saved the thief who was crucified with Christ. It is faith alone that saves you and me.

The possibility of John 3:16 not being true is a very scary thing. The good news is that John 3:16 is true. John 3:16 is our promise of salvation – a promise made by the one true, triune God, who has never broken a promise.

As Easter draws closer and we once again experience the fulfillment of God's promised salvation, share the good news of John 3:16 with someone who doesn't know their Savior. Remember, God's love, God's Son, and salvation by faith alone are all for whoever, wherever and however they call upon His name. Jesus Christ, the only way of salvation. (John 14:6)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus,

Amen.

S.D.G
Soli Deo Gloria