
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. (ESV)

"For God So Loved ..."

The Gospel reading for today is that very familiar statement of Jesus. It's from John 3:16. You may even be able to say it with me, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

I'll be honest with you. That verse surprises me. It says: "God so loved the world." Do you love the world? Now, I think I

can say that I like the world. The sunrises and the sunsets are beautiful here in Colorado where we live. I'm thankful for my family and those who love me. I enjoy reading a good book or going for a long hike or bike ride. Those are some great parts of life in this world.

But there's another side to all of this. I don't like the aches and pains when I hike and bike. I don't like the difficulty and discord that sometimes happen in family life. I don't like the frustration of traffic jams. I don't like when people are mean or hurtful. And those are minor dislikes compared to the heartbreak of this hurting world. One glance at the headlines can bring tears to your eyes as you see senseless death, rampant crime, and painful abuse. I don't love that part of this world.

What about you? Do you love your world? As you listen today you can probably think of some wonderful blessings that you treasure in this world, some great experiences, some loving people. But you also may be struggling. You don't love the loneliness that you're feeling. The health struggles that you're going through get you down. You lost your job and you wonder what you're going to do. The addiction in your life is destroying you and everyone around you. Or life just hasn't turned out the

way you thought it would. And you don't love that very much at all.

But Jesus told a man named Nicodemus in John 3:16, "God so loved the world." Nicodemus was just like you. He didn't love his world all that much. He was a religious leader who felt trapped in a helpless and hurt-filled life. He didn't know a way out. His friends weren't helping. So, one night he snuck away to meet Jesus. Jesus was unlike anyone Nicodemus had met. This Jesus was doing miracles. He was teaching about new life instead of the old, humdrum life. Nicodemus knew he needed something different, so he went to Jesus.

And do you know what Jesus did? He put something new into Nicodemus' life. To a life that was plagued by brokenness and sin Jesus said, "God so loved the world."

Friends, I want to tell you that Jesus puts something new into your life today. You may not love your world or be thrilled with your life, but God loves you deeply. And He comes to you today with the strength, the hope, the encouragement, and the new beginning that you need. He gives you something new. And that's powerful!

This was really driven home for me when I heard the true story about a young man named Johnny. He was a bagger at a

grocery store. You know what I mean. He put people's groceries in their bags! Johnny the bagger was by no means in the upper tier of the organizational chart in the company. But he was included with all the other workers when the president of the grocery store chain invited everyone to a vision and mission meeting for the company. Two world-renowned business consultants were meeting with all the workers to present the vision of effective customer service. They told the group, "Every encounter you have with a customer is a chance to make a difference. Your words and actions matter, so go make a difference."

Johnny was inspired by those words. His life mattered. He could make a difference. So as Johnny made his way home, he started to think about how he could make his encounters with customers more meaningful, how he could give them something that would make a difference in their lives. That's when he had an idea. When he got home, he wrote down a "thought for the day." It was a kind and helpful statement that he thought would bring some cheer to the people in the grocery store line. His dad helped him type the thought for the day into the computer, six to a page. Then Johnny printed out 50 pages, enough to make 300 "thoughts for the day." He cut them into strips of paper and

signed each one of them personally. Then he brought them to work. Every time he bagged someone's groceries, he put his thought for the day into the last bag. When the customer was getting ready to leave the store, Johnny would smile and say, "I put something extra in bag for you. I hope it helps you have a nice day."

An amazing thing happened at the store. Customers loved what Johnny was putting into the bag. Soon the line at Johnny's checkout was stretching back into the frozen food aisle. People who normally shopped once a week were coming into the store every day. When managers tried to usher people to shorter lines, they refused to go. "We want Johnny's thought for the day," they said.

Not long after that, managers were reporting that the culture of the store was changing. When the floral department had a broken flower or unused corsage the workers would usually throw the flowers away. But now they searched the store for an older woman or little girl and, with a smile and greeting, presented the flower to her. Everything was changing-all because one person decided to put a blessing in people's bags.

As you live your life, a lot gets put into your bag. Some of it is good, some not so good. You've got some heavy items to carry

in your life. Some of what you've got is balanced precariously. You're not in control. It feels like everything can come tumbling out at any moment. Every day you pick up more items, you get loaded down, you bear the burden of brokenness and sin. But then came Jesus. And He put something into your grocery bag-something different, something that brings blessing.

You heard that happen in John chapter three. Nicodemus was loaded down with a life that he didn't love. And Jesus said to him, ***"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."*** You see, Johnny isn't the only bagger. Jesus is a bagger, too. And this was Jesus the bagger in action. He brought blessing to a broken heart. He brought the news of forgiveness to a hopeless soul. He brought the joy of the resurrection to a worn-out life. Jesus the bagger put something new into Nicodemus' bag.

Do you realize that's what Jesus gives you today? It's what Jesus is all about! All you have to do is read about Jesus' life in the first four books of the New Testament-Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. You'll see Jesus the bagger in action! You'll see lines of people that would have stretched way past the frozen food aisle as so many came to receive the life Jesus gave. There

was healing, the forgiveness of sins, words of consolation, words of teaching and correction. Jesus always puts something good into people's bags.

That's what He does for you today. You may not love your world, but your Savior Jesus loves you! And He comes to you where you're at and puts blessing into your bag. It's not just a thought for the day. It's Himself. Jesus puts Himself into your bag! He bled and died on the cross to be in your life with the forgiveness of your sins. He rose up from the grave to be in your bag, to be the help and strength you need in your life every day! The presence of Christ Jesus who loves you gets poured into your life through baptism and communion. His Word is the blessing of new life and hope in your bag.

Do you need some strength? Psalm 46 verse 1 says, ***"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."*** I wonder if that is exactly what you need in your bag today.

Or, you may need forgiveness. 2 Corinthians 5 verse 17 says, ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"***

Perhaps you're searching for God's promise in your life. The Bible says in Jeremiah 29 verse 11, ***"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to***

harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." You may have felt like your life was a dead-end when you came in today, but now you're given God's promise of plans for you. Blessing has been added to your bag.

Do you need a clear invitation from Jesus today? Jesus said in Matthew chapter 11 verse 28, ***"Come to Me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*** I wonder if this is the day that Jesus is calling you to receive His rest.

You may be saying to yourself, "I just heard exactly what I needed." Or you may be thinking, "My husband or wife needs that verse." Or, "I have a friend who needs to hear those words." Well, share the blessing. Pass it along.

You see my point, don't you? Johnny and Jesus aren't the only baggers. You are, too. Every day you're a bagger. Every day you know that because Jesus put new life in your bag, you've got something to put into the bags of the people in your life. You can share the news that, in the midst of a difficult life, "God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

So, how are you doing as a bagger? What are you putting into the lives of the people in your "line"? What about your actions? Your caring actions, living a life of integrity, being kind

and truthful and doing the right thing will bring blessing to the people in your life. Your actions can put blessing in people's bags.

Perhaps being a bagger means being a friend. Who needs you to listen to them? Who needs you to show some genuine care? When you really care about someone, God will give you opportunities to put blessing in their bag. It may be a word of encouragement. It may be a prayer. It may be a word of correction and accountability. But it's putting blessing in people's bags.

You may even be someone who wants to reach out in an active way. It may be through a conversation with someone in your life. You may send an e-mail or written note to someone you care about. Maybe you make a phone call or send a text message. But there are times when the Holy Spirit leads you to speak up, to actively bring the message of Jesus to someone, to put the blessing of God in a person's bag.

Let me tell you about a former member of mine named Hulda. Hulda would have been 117-years-old this year. I'll tell you honestly, in her later years her world wasn't that loveable. Her dear husband passed away. Because of declining health, she had to move out of her beautiful home and away from her family. Hulda took up residence in a nursing home-something she never

imagined would happen in her life. She was confined to a wheel chair and depended on others to get through the day. But in the midst of all of that, Hulda looked me in the eye and said to me, "I'm happier than I've ever been in my life. I've never felt closer to Jesus than now." Hulda was a shining light in that nursing home. She was a bagger! Every resident, guest, and worker who came into her room received a joyful greeting, a word of encouragement, and a sincere expression of the love of Jesus. Hulda's life had taken so many difficult turns, but she knew that God so loved her and God so loved the world! She wanted to put that Good News, that hope and new life, into people's bags.

I want to ask you: How's your bagging going? What are you putting into people's bags? Do you see that God has new life and new purpose for you today?

Nicodemus left after that evening talk with Jesus. He appears again in John chapter seven-defending Jesus. We see Nicodemus again in John chapter 19, using his own resources to help with Jesus' burial. Nicodemus' world was changed. He had blessing in his bag.

I hope and pray that you've received the blessing of Jesus Christ in your bag today; that in the midst of life which can be so difficult, you've been blessed with the surprising but wonderful

news that God so loved the world through Jesus Christ! In addition to that encouragement, do you know what else I hope and pray? That you'll start fresh today and be a bagger!

Let's pray: Dear Jesus, our Savior and Friend. Thank you for being the blessing in our bag. Thank you for the forgiveness of our sins, for hope and strength each day, and for life everlasting. Use us now as baggers to bring your blessing of love and new life to the world. Amen.