

“For God So Loved the World”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, IN  
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**John 3: 14-21**

The most famous verse in the Bible? The Gospel summarized in one verse? The most-quoted verse in Scripture?

These are a few of the descriptions you might hear for John 3:16. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life.” For many of us, if we need to hold onto one verse for our faith, this would be it.

And yet, in our desire to center ourselves on one verse, we can lose perspective on the context in which it is found. For instance, how many of us would know before this morning’s reading, that this verse comes in the midst of a dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus? What is the larger context of this passage, and how might that influence how we understand this single verse? It can be very dangerous to preach or promote a single verse of the Bible without a full understanding of where it comes from.

This scripture from John, though, is one of the most powerful texts we will ever hear, even more so by the fact that it is Lent and we are all walking along a road which leads to Jerusalem, and the culmination of our faith. It is for no other reason than that, then, that we should take a fresh look at why God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son, so all who would believe would not perish but have eternal life.

To begin, let’s consider who Jesus is talking to – Nicodemus – when he shares these words from John 3. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible calls him a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews (3:1). Other translations call him a “ruler” or “a member of the ruling council” (NIV). As a member of the Pharisees, he belonged to a pretty select group. There were likely no more than 6,000 Pharisees at this time in Israel’s history. Their role was to serve the Lord by studying the Torah and keeping the law in a strict and faithful manner. As a part of this “religious fraternity” as William Willimon calls the Pharisees, “there was also the expectation of solidarity with other members of the group, of finding one’s identity primarily within the company, of presenting a united front” (*Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 28, #2, 4). In essence, once you became a Pharisee, you were expected to hold tight to the party line, not striking out on your own adventures.

But in this story, Nicodemus is striking out on his own. He is struggling with his long-held beliefs and the identity of this man called Jesus of Nazareth. We learn from the beginning of chapter three that

he must not have wanted his fellow Pharisees to know about his trip, for he came to Jesus under the cover of darkness at night. And in approaching the man whom he has sought out, he identifies him by what he has seen and heard: "We know 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" (3:2). Nicodemus wants to believe that Jesus is sent from God, and yet Jesus' life does not match the understood notion of the Messiah as noted in the Hebrew Scriptures. Implied in Nicodemus' statement is the question: "You are from God, aren't you?"

And in Jesus' response, we realize Nicodemus' lack of understanding. When Jesus says that to see the kingdom, one must be born from above, Nicodemus cannot think of any other level than human: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" (3:4). And as Jesus explains to him that everyone must be born not of the flesh, but of water and the Spirit, Nicodemus is truly baffled. "How can these things be?" (3:9). He goes from initially having an inkling of faith in Jesus, to not comprehending other than on a human level, to finally disbelieving the words of Jesus. Nicodemus came under the cloak of darkness to seek the light which would illumine the night. But all he left with was more darkness, for he would not allow the light to shine into his heart and soul.

At the heart of this passage is what it means to be saved by God – the doctrine of salvation. For just as the people of Israel were in need of saving from the serpents in the wilderness, so too is the human race in need of saving by the Son of God. God took pity on the Israelites after they repented, and made for them a statue of a serpent, which they could look at and be healed of their poisonous bites. That serpent statue was to be lifted up for all to see, for all to gaze upon, for all to seek healing and forgiveness. Now, too, Jesus says that "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" (3:15).

Brian Stoffregen writes: *If the solution in Numbers was a snake raised on a pole -- because the problem was poisonous serpents on the ground; so, in John if the solution is a human (the Word made flesh) on a pole, the problem must be the humans on the ground. Our problem is that we are human, so a human being had to be lifted up on the pole . . . so that we might look at him and live . . .*

*The symbol of Jesus on a pole indicates that the problem with us is us -- and that Jesus is the solution . . . Often, rather than admitting, "I am the problem," we are more likely to confess that a few bad deeds are the problem: "I've lied, so I'd better stop lying." "I stole a comic book and I'd better stop doing that." "I was driving fast and I'll try to keep my speed down." Whenever the problem is defined as doing something bad, the solution is simply to stop doing that bad deed -- or start doing*

*good deeds. Salvation becomes nothing more than doing good things and avoiding the bad. Such a solution doesn't need Jesus -- or Jesus simply becomes a model of doing the right things. This watered-down, cheap salvation comes about when we don't see that we are the problem. The problem is not the things we do; but that we are us -- sinful human beings* (Brian Stoffregen, *Exegetical Notes at Crossmarks, Lent IV, Year B*, [www.crossmarks.com](http://www.crossmarks.com)).

Perhaps that is why John 3:16 is so important. Despite our best attempts at solving our salvation by eliminating bad habits and starting good ones, God loves us still. Despite our best efforts to gain eternal life without Jesus or acknowledging that we are the problem, God loves us still. Despite our lack of understanding and walking in darkness like Nicodemus, God loves us still. God acted out of love, not condemnation or judgment (3:17). God acted out of love to save us from ourselves, and the only way for that to happen was for another human being, in all his divinity, to be raised up on a cross, to suffer for all the world's sins, and to die a death reserved for a criminal, even though it was, in fact, the death of a king.

Kerry Hasler-Brooks writes the following: *The verse's words are, in a way, lonely ones, read and recited most often on their own, broken away from the chapter and the Gospel where they live. I rediscover Nicodemus each time I read John 3 in its entirety, surprised again to find that the verse belonged first to this ancient Pharisee. It is Christ's answer to his simple, wondering question: "How can these things be?" I forget that this all-American verse was born in an ancient world and has lived in the mouths of millions these last thousands of years. I forget that these words aren't mine alone.*

*Perhaps this should have been obvious. The verse carries a big promise, not a private one. A promise, as it says quite clearly, for the world. But the mythical individualism of my childhood faith, which rested exclusively on the idea of a personal relationship with Christ, wrapped itself around this verse. Right now, in this time of social distancing, as I long to wrap my arms around my sister or to share a meal at a table filled with friends or to smile at a stranger in the store and see them smile back, I am desperate to look up from the words on the page. I am desperate not for the words tucked in the private recesses of my heart but for the people who carry these words as I do. I cling not only to the promise of love written into the verse but to the promise that I am not reading alone* (*Christian Century*, February 24, 2021, 19).

The great power of this passage, and of this particular verse from John's Gospel, is that we are never alone, even when we feel incredibly isolated. We are never forgotten, even when it seems the world keeps passing us by. Our pain, our grief, our anxieties do not go unnoticed, because our God loves us unconditionally through God's only Son. Our triumphs and failures, our greatest joys and deepest lows, they all take

place in the context of our lives that are grounded in the love which God gives us in Jesus Christ. That is a powerful promise not just for us who are Christ's disciples, but for the entire world, a world which God loved and is loving so deeply. The sooner we embrace that tenet of this famous passage, the sooner we will walk in the light of God.

Our response to this incredible love which God shows us is to walk in the light. To shine God's light of hope into the darkest recesses of people's lives, who cannot see hope through the poverty they are enduring. To shine God's light of peace and justice into the dark shadows of hatred, enmity, racism, and despair. To shine God's light of nurture and grace into the darkest areas of grief, woundedness, and shame. We are not called to keep God's love to ourselves – for God's love is for all the world. As we allow that love to redeem and transform our lives, we must be changed in a way that compels us to shine God's light in ways that shatters the darkness of this world, making clear to others that God indeed loves them.

“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.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.