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St. Luke's Episcopal Church ~ Anchorage, Kentucky
II Lent ~ March 11 & 12, 2017
John 3:1-17

What more can be said? “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” (John 3:16 NRSV). This scripture verse from the gospel of John is a sermon in and of itself, and it is one of the most commonly known scripture verses of the Bible.

Allow me to share a story with you about a man named Tim. Tim's parents were Christian missionaries serving in the Philippines, where his mother contracted amoebic dysentery and fell into a coma. As she began to recover she discovered she was pregnant. Because of the medications used to treat her, she experienced a severe placental abruption. Doctors expected a stillbirth and recommended that the pregnancy be terminated, but Tim's parents decided against the doctor's recommendation, citing their strong faith, and in the summer of 1987 Tim was born. Though he was undernourished, he gradually recovered to full health.

As a young man Tim would go on to become a stellar athlete, and a highly-touted quarterback, who was often referred to as ‘a walking freight truck.’ He would go on to be the first college sophomore to become a Heisman Trophy winner, and lead his college team to two national championships. Tim was stood very strong in his faith, and before each game he would get down on one knee and pray on the sideline. He drew much criticism and condemnation for doing so, but Tim did not let this deter him. In the 2009 championship game he wore John 3:16 on his eye black; as a result, the verse was the highest-ranked Google search term over the next 24 hours, generating over 90 million-plus searches.

But wait, it gets even more interesting – after college Tim went on to play for the NFL, and in 2012 he led his team to an upset victory. During this game he again wore ‘John 3:16’ on his eye-black, exactly three years from the date that he wore John 3:16 on his eye-black while playing in college. During the game he threw for 316 yards, his yards per rush were 3.16, his yards per catch were 31.6, the ratings for the game was 31.6 and the time of possession was 31.6.” On top of this, during the game approximately 94 million people googled John 3:16 and once again it was the number one trending item on Facebook and Twitter. Tim summed up the amazing imagery with the numbers by saying “A lot of people said it was just a coincidence. I say big God.” Coincidence or providence? Carnal or spiritual? Seen verses unseen? The Spirit moves...

You see - John 3:16 is a declaration of God’s fundamental love for the world, and this love that harkens back to the creation motif is promulgated throughout John’s gospel. John expresses that the world that came into being through the logos (Jesus) remains the object of divine love. As Martin Luther phrased it “For the world has me; I am its God.” God’s own being is nature and love, and the supreme manifestation of God’s love is the giving of Jesus. Therefore, the declaration that “God gave his only Son” refers both to the incarnation and the cross. Jesus ‘the Son’ is given to the world as the Word who “became flesh and lived among us” and was “given up” to death on the cross (Romans 8:32). Jesus was given up to death so that the world may have eternal life. Jesus is the face of God turned toward a hurting and estranged world who is both fully divine and fully human. The Spirit and the flesh.

Therefore, when Jesus says to Nicodemus “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” Jesus is referring to being born of the Spirit, which is to receive God’s

gift of eternal life. The Spirit is God's power and life operating in creaturely existence to transform it. The Spirit moves.... So – how is the Spirit at work in our lives? How is the Spirit working in your life? We are born physically of human parents, and we are born spiritually of water and the Spirit. Through the sacrament of holy baptism we are born of the Spirit, as “Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's body – the Church.” Therefore, we become new creatures in Christ Jesus.

Moreover, earlier in John's gospel it is recorded that new life comes from being born of ‘water and the Spirit’ likely referring to Baptism. So, again, through the practice of baptism the Spirit is at work bringing about new life. Our tangible rituals, liturgies, and practices that structure life in the Christian community are ‘habitations of the Spirit’ and places where the Spirit transforms us both personally and corporately, as we are here today.

This season of Lent is an appropriate time for us to do a ‘sort of’ spiritual inventory. Are we taking moments to flee, be silent, and pray so that we can commune with the Spirit? Or are struggling to do this as we succumb to the pressures and demands of the flesh and of the world? It is indeed a challenge to ‘step away’ so to speak and commune with God through the Spirit. However, it is essential to our way of life if we expect to commune with God through the Spirit, as we seek out his “still, small voice.”

Did you know that Lent is derived from a Saxon word meaning “spring?” In the early church, Lent was viewed as a spiritual spring, a time of light and joy in the renewal of the soul's life, in which God was the center and source of life. This communion with God was made possible by the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and is perpetuated still today by the Spirit. As the Spirit continues to move....

When we live in the Spirit, Jesus guides our attention toward the world that God loves, and his Spirit will give us the courage and assurance to boldly walk in the light of Christ, and to proclaim His love to the world through our actions. For when we walk in the light of his Spirit we will find ourselves in a deepening commitment to the world, and we will begin to see all people in the light of God's love through the Spirit. Let this season of Lent be a spiritual spring -- a time of light and joy in the renewal of your soul and Spirit. May our faith be strengthened in God who loved the world so much that He gave His only Son, so that whosoever who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Live by the Spirit...flee the world, be silent, pray - for it is only then that you will know the true power of the Spirit.

Amen+