

# For God So Loved

## *John 3:1-17*

Pastor and professor Tom Long says that while he was at Princeton Seminary, he went to a nearby Presbyterian church that prides itself on being an academic, intellectual church. Early on, he said, he went to a family night supper and sat down next to a man, introduced himself, told him he was new, and said, "Have you been here long?"

"Oh yes," the man said. "In fact I was here before this became such a scholarly church. Why, I'm probably the only non-intellectual left. I haven't understood a sermon in over 25 years."

"Then why do you keep coming," Tom asked?

"Because every Monday night a group of us get in the church van and drive over to the youth correctional center. Sometimes we play basketball, or play games. Usually we share a Bible story. But mostly we just get to know these kids and listen to them.

"I started going because Christians are supposed to do those kind of things. But now I could never stop. Sharing the love of God at that youth center has changed my life."

And then he made this profound statement. "You cannot prove the promises of God in advance, but if you live them, they're true, every one."

John's Gospel opens in a stirring prologue that declares that Jesus is the light, the light of the world. Yet, humanity tends, according to John, to love darkness more than light. Still the light, the light of the world, shines in the darkness, and the darkness has yet to overcome it.

In the New Testament, darkness has spiritual significance. Jesus speaks of the *power of darkness* (Lk. 22:53). God is the one who is light and *in him there is no darkness* (1 Jn. 1:5). They looked at Jesus and exclaimed that, *The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in a region in the shadow of death, light has dawned* (Mt. 4:15).

Late one night, in the darkness, a leader of the synagogue, Nicodemus, a learned man, came to visit Jesus. Nicodemus took a huge risk in his secret nighttime visit to see the Teacher Jesus, but risks are sometimes necessary for growth and change.

Nicodemus' nighttime meeting with Jesus has some important messages:

One message is that there is no age limit for learning deeper messages about life. Nicodemus was a *"ruler of the people,"* a man of standing in that community! We assume he was also a man of some years, some maturity. Yet, something was brewing in his mind and heart, and that

something took him in his maturity and social standing to Jesus in that evening hour.

The deeper questions of life's meaning can be discussed when we are in our teenage years or in our 50's, 70's or 90's. The deeper aspects of life's meaning can be questioned when one is in high school or much later. The facing of the deeper questions of life's meaning can come from some fiery event - like planes crashing into the twin towers in New York - or can be part of life's routine growing. But questioning the meaning of life is part of every human life; it is part of our growing and deepening as human beings.

Nicodemus must have been at one of those points in his life. He sought out Jesus to talk about important things. Jesus' word to Nicodemus was the invitation to begin living in a different world. Even as he talked with him about new birth, he must have been looking at the fine robes that Nicodemus wore. He certainly knew of the social and political power that Nicodemus could wield. From a distant view, Nicodemus was a man of the world who had everything he could want! But Nicodemus obviously didn't feel that way.

Even as the door was opened for the finely robed Nicodemus, so Jesus opened another door for him - a spiritual door, a door opening to a wider world. We are invited to understand that life upon this world is not the full story of life! "Nicodemus, you must be born again. You must be born into the new life, this spiritual understanding of life." I can imagine Jesus going on to say that life for Nicodemus is more than temple meetings, more than the rituals of Sabbath, more than the accolades of the crowds that watch the priestly processions, more than many years of age, more than the busyness of life from sunrise to sunset. "Nicodemus, you must start your life again, only in a new realm!"

This is the problem Nicodemus is having. Nicodemus knows only one language.

And that is the language of earth. It is the only language that any of us knows. Suddenly Jesus appears on the scene and begins speaking the language of Heaven. Nicodemus hears the words *You must be born again*, and he is confused. So he asks, *"How can a person go back into his mother's womb and come out again?"*

God has created us to be more than creatures of the earth. God has breathed into us spirits that hunger to be part of the spiritual world. It is mystery, like the wind that blows through the trees. We don't understand the wind, where it comes from, where it goes, but we know it is present! It is mystery, this spiritual world into which we may be born. Nicodemus, you must enter that new world.

Nicodemus was on the road moving into that spiritual world. He had sought Jesus, even if in secret. The gospel story tells more. Nicodemus continued on that spiritual road, for John's Gospel mentions Nicodemus twice more. Once this nighttime student defended Jesus before his fellow Pharisees. It was a bold stand, taken in the beginning of the plot to have Jesus silenced. And later, as the body of Jesus is removed from the cross, it is Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who care for the burial. John says, *"Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus*

*by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews."* Yes, the record is there. Nicodemus was indeed born again.

John 3:16 sums it up as well as it can be summed up: *God so loved the world ...*

That is really where we begin this morning. *God so loved the world ...* Can you think of anything this world is hungrier for than love?

*"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 the most beloved of all Bible passages. It comes from this conversation with Nicodemus. Martin Luther called it, "The gospel in miniature." This one verse has been translated into more languages than any other part of the Bible. It has actually been translated into Klingon, the fictional language of a warrior race on Star Trek. Klingon had never previously had a word for love!

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish (may not be lost in darkness) but may have eternal life."* God sent Jesus not to condemn the efforts of the faithful, but to provide a way, where before there was no way. The saying has been preserved here in the Fourth Gospel as a way of expressing a truth that was perhaps greater than even the author could understand.

*"For God so loved the world ..."* There it stands against all our attempts to make God's love narrow and specific. Even the author of John's Gospel faced the temptation to say that God doesn't love all humanity and history. God loves just God's own: those whom Jesus has called out of the world. The disciples are spoken of as loving Jesus and are commanded to love one another, but are never told to love the world. So even John seems a bit tempted to restrict the scope of Christian love to Christ and the church, and yet John can't get past the fact that love is the most adequate description of God's attitude toward all creation.

*"For God so loved the world ..."* the whole world, the whole of creation. We have managed to compartmentalize life so most of us think God loves us and we need to serve God. But we aren't very good at thinking what it would mean if God loves political power and corporate structures and natural energies and vast space. Our failure to understand the meaning of *"For God so loved the world ..."* has meant that we have often demonized our enemies and not cared very well for the whole earth.

*"For God so loved the world..."* is the beginning of a declarative statement. It is a given. God's love is for all creation. So often the word is spoken as if it were conditional, as if God will love us if only we meet some condition. If you are righteous, God will love you. If you are educated and literate, God will love you. If you hold the right political beliefs, God will love you...

*"For God so loved the world..."* It's our defense against thinking that God's love is some abstract and metaphysical emotion. God is not distant and unconnected from history. God in Jesus

Christ comes to redeem and restore creation. God gave God-self in Jesus Christ with the desire and intention to redeem us.

A member of one of my congregations had just returned from a family vacation out west. She was in ecstasy over the beauty she had seen – the wilderness, nature, and the glory of the world in bloom on bright sunny days. She said, “I’ve never been so close to God in my whole life.

I’ve got nothing against meeting Jesus on some bright, beautiful, exquisite day, when everything seems to come together and all is just right. But there are those who come to Jesus by night, stumbling, groping their way in the darkness, only to come face to face with his love and embrace. In the dark, they thought they were lost. But it was in the dark they were found. Perhaps we are to see, in this story of Nicodemus, that coming to Jesus in the dark can be good.

I don’t know if the sun is shining for you right now. I hope it is. I hope that you are happy, that things are going well for you, that you are in good health, that you and your family are fine. But I can tell you this: if this day, this second Sunday in Lent happens to find you not well, not well off, not happy, but in the dark, at twilight, or even toward midnight – if you know what I mean – then rejoice. Rejoice that we have a Savior that works evening hours. Rejoice that our God works the night shift. By night is as good a time as any to come to Jesus and let him sit with you, talk with you, teach you, and reveal his will and his way to you. When it’s dark, that’s a good time to call on Jesus. Thanks be to God.

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