

“For God So Loves the World”

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Our Gospel passage today is one that is so frequently quoted that it has essentially developed a brand all of its own. John 3:16, the second to last verse in this passage, is printed on shopping bags, billboards, the backs of eighteen wheelers and even tattooed on the bodies of countless Christians. For some people it is a sort of shorthand, a way of identifying themselves as a Christian, while for others it is the ultimate foundational mystery of faith around which all study and worship are centered. John 3:16 is so ubiquitous that the words that chapter and verse represent are nearly forgotten. 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. That one line of text is one of the most theologically profound statements in all of scripture. It is no wonder these words have taken on a life of their own in our culture, words that spell out the great mystery of faith, as simple and as utterly complex as the paradox of Christ’s own existence.

But the devil showed us last week just how dangerous it can be to take a single line of scripture out of its context. When Satan tempted Jesus in the desert, he quoted lines of Hebrew scripture in an effort to entice the Son of God to sinful behavior. Jesus responded in kind, pointing out mandates elsewhere in scripture that directly counteracted the temptations the devil presented him with. To isolate a single strand of text in the massive and intricate tapestry of the Bible is an easy, and often dangerous, way to fall prey to temptations and behaviors that are not of God. While great comfort and wisdom can be found on nearly every page of the Scriptures we have inherited, we do well to pay attention to the greater story, and to learn from our ancestors’ victories and mistakes in the faith.

So what comes before and after John 3:16, that A list celebrity of Bible verses? Where exactly is Jesus, in place and in time? What prompts our savior to voice this deep truth, and to whom was he speaking? The

passage we heard today is early in the Gospel of John, and right at the beginning of Jesus's public ministry. Just prior to these events, Jesus has made his way to Jerusalem for the observation of Passover, and has caused quite the scene, turning over tables and criticizing those in the Temple who sought to profit from the piety of others. Jesus remains in Jerusalem to preach and teach and perform acts of healing and forgiveness, and more and more people learn of him and believe in his power. With such a reputation of power and controversy, it is no wonder Nicodemus, a Pharisee and respected leader of the Jewish community, feels the need to approach Jesus in private, after hours and away from the crowds. Nicodemus is literally putting his life, his reputation and his position on the line in order to come close to the wandering preacher who has challenged the status quo with every word and public act. Although we are often trained to hear Pharisee as code for "enemy," we might hear this conversation a little differently if we hold some compassion for Nicodemus and his cautious curiosity.

Nicodemus approaches Jesus not with a question, but first with an affirmation, a confession of newborn faith. He addresses Jesus respectfully as an authority, as a teacher, and states his belief that Jesus must come from God. This faith claim is one of observation, a confession in response to a visible and logical reality. Nicodemus believes that signs and wonders such as those of Jesus are impossible to accomplish apart from God, and so Jesus must have the presence of God with him. Simple, but a cornerstone upon which a strong and sure faith can be built. Jesus senses the sincerity of Nicodemus's confession, the struggles of doubt and God-given faith in this Pharisee's heart. And Jesus responds to this first fruit, this seedling of Nicodemus's belief with wholehearted acceptance, and with his next lesson. Now that Nicodemus has taken the first careful steps on the journey to which Christ invites us all, Jesus reaches out a hand and offers to direct his path.

Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Poor Nicodemus, desperate to understand, asks question after question and listens closely to his teacher's progressively more mysterious answers. His faith is new, and tender, and Jesus guides him along the path to a

new understanding about what this journey will mean for his own life and for the life of the world. You must be born from above, Nicodemus. And Nicodemus says to him, “How can these things be?” This question, and the emotion that resounds within it, is familiar to everyone who has ever embarked on a journey of greater faith. We step tenderly into the water, and find that it is deeper than we could have possibly imagined. We kneel down in prayer, and are overwhelmed by the magnitude of our own needs and the needs of the world. We turn the pages of our Bible, and encounter line after line of mystifying, contradicting, intimidating text. How can these things be? All the shame of our own misunderstanding, all the guilt at our failed endeavors and all of the emptiness of our comparison to others we believe have grasped the impossible while we remain unmoored. How can these things be?

Jesus answered him, “are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” It could just as well read, “Are you a Christian, a parent, a teacher, a priest, and yet you do not understand these things?” If we do not see in Nicodemus our own fledgling faith, we might hear Jesus responding with shame, with accusations and disappointment. But remember that Jesus is a teacher, who is up in the middle of the night with a struggling new student, guiding him into a new realm of understanding. If you are blessed as I have been to have a teacher care for you the same way Jesus is caring for Nicodemus, you might listen for a familiar tone in Christ’s voice. “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” There is compassion, and gentleness, and a small measure of humor in this answer. Nicodemus feels himself on the verge of drowning in all the things he does not understand, and Jesus reaches down and pulls him back to shore, to the warm shallow waters where he will learn to move with the currents of faith without letting the mysteries overtake and overwhelm him, where his teacher is there helping him remember to breathe.

Jesus continues the lesson, rewording and reiterating the problem in as many ways as he can, inviting Nicodemus to continue to struggle with this puzzle until a new understanding can emerge. And in this late night makeshift classroom, Jesus gifts Nicodemus with a glimpse of the deeper reality that brought a Pharisee to the feet of a wandering preacher. Jesus knows that Nicodemus has risked much to hear this lesson, and that there will be many who will turn their backs on him for believing that Jesus is the Son of Man. But it is to this

Pharisee, a faithful man full of doubts and questions, to whom Jesus gives one of the most beloved and shortest sermons in human history. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

This is the way that Christ responds to our first timid knocking on the door in the midst of darkness and doubt. This is the wide open embrace that awaits us on the other side. Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born from above, and at first Nicodemus did not understand. He believed that to be born again was impossible, that the creation that took place in his mother’s womb could not be repeated. But Jesus teaches Nicodemus that God prefers the impossible over the probable, that the one who created all things is in this very moment recreating him. Just as our earthly mothers carried and bore us, our heavenly creator carries us and creates us and gives us life over and over again, renewing in us the Holy Spirit whose movement draws us ever back to eternal life. For God so loves the world.