

Pastor Jon's March 4, 2023 Sermon

Text: John 3:1-17

“Nick at Night”

John 3:16-17 is sometimes known as “The Gospel in a nutshell”. God so loves the world, but there is sin and darkness in the world, so God sends Jesus as a gift on our behalf to save us. That might be why in the old days, and even less frequently today, you would see people holding up John 3:16 signs at sporting events. They wanted you to look it up.

For years, I named my fantasy football team John 3:16. I even had personalized Titleist Pro V1 golf balls made with John 3:16 on them. When you lose them, God can still use them for good. I don't have any left. Also, did you know that In and Out Burger on the west coast even lists John 3:16 on the bottom of their soda cups and French Fry containers... among other Bible verses?

But we learn today that John 3:16-17 is set within a larger conversation Jesus has with a Pharisee named Nicodemus about baptism and being born again. Nicodemus also comes to Jesus at night. I affectionately love calling this text Nic at night. This story reminds me that no matter how far off you may feel from God, or if you struggle with your faith in Christ, you can change.

First why at night? In John's Gospel, night or darkness means being in a state of unbelief. Coming to Jesus at night meant Nicodemus was seeking to learn more, but still not believing in Jesus. He also didn't want to be found out by his peers or family.

Nicodemus is intrigued by the signs Jesus is doing. In chapter 2 of John, Jesus just turned water into wine at Cana, and then flipped over the tables of the money changers in the temple saying, “Do not turn my Father's house into a shopping mall” according to the Message. Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, or Jewish Lawyer, spent most of his education trying to figure out what he must “do” to be saved. Being in a right relationship with God for him depended on how good he was. And yet as humans, we know how bad we are, and that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

But then something happens, you hear about this teacher, a rabbi who says there is another way to be saved. A way that seems too good to be true. It is called grace upon grace in John 1. It goes against everything you ever knew. It goes against your parent's beliefs... what you learned in school. It is grounded in God's action upon the world in Jesus.

You can't quite wrap your head around it. You want to learn more.

You completely miss the point of Jesus. You are thinking literally, but Jesus is talking about a deeper spiritual understanding. The teacher tells you that you must become like a little child to enter the Kingdom... or to simply be reborn... born this time of water and Spirit. You have worked so hard to get close to God, and now you must start over and re-enter your mother's womb? Nic, confused, says, "How can these things be?"

Jesus concludes our Gospel for today with, "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. God didn't send the son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

God so loved the world. The world in John's gospel is the Greek word Kosmos. That means everyone and everything in all creation. But the word "world" in John also has a shadow side. The "world" also contained things like hate, darkness, falsehood, and scarcity. But God loved the world so much that God sent God's only begotten Son, Jesus, into the world to save the world... to put the world right again. Anyone who believes in Jesus is promised eternal life. Eternal life in John's Gospel is both in the here and now and after we die. It is described as life, light, truth, and abundance in John.

God wasn't finished with Nicodemus yet. Remember, Nic came first a night. In chapter 7, when the Pharisees were debating if Jesus could be the Messiah, Nicodemus spoke up and pleaded for Jesus to have a fair hearing. Finally after Jesus died on the cross in chapter 19, Nicodemus shows up in broad daylight with Joseph of Arimathea to

give Jesus a proper burial. Coming during the day meant he finally believed in Jesus.

The Good news is that Jesus came into the world for all of us “As is”. God didn’t wait till we got it right, or the world was perfect. He came while we were still sinners. He came out of love and as a gift of grace. In our baptism, we have been born again, and again, and again. Luther felt out baptismal promises offer us a daily conversion. Every day is a new day. In baptism you have put on Christ forever. You are protected from sin, death, and the devil. You have been marked by the Holy Spirit forever.

Just knowing Jesus means that you can experience eternal life now according to John 17. In Christ, you will find life that really is life. You will find a light that can overcome the darkness of the world. You will find truth when it seems like truth comes in multiple forms, and abundant life. But know that God desires abundant life for all. If God loves the world as is, and wants to liberate the whole world, that means we too are called to love all of God’s creation and fight for eternal and abundant life for all.

Like Nicodemus, we are all on a journey from darkness into light. God isn’t finished with us yet. Amen