

Sermon for Lent 2A  
Sunday, March 5, 2023  
“God’s love gives us hope and salvation.”

Text: John 3:1-17

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The southern region of the United States is known as the “Bible Belt.” Among the things that you would notice in the Bible Belt is the large number of massive ultra-modern church buildings, billboards with inspirational messages and bible verses, and the number of cars with religious-themed stickers on their bumpers. There’s no wondering why this part of the country is called the “Bible Belt.” It seems that there are two main themes that stand out in Christian bumper sticker and billboard advertising: “You must be born again,” and “For God so loved the world.” The bumper stickers and the billboards capture the two major themes presented in our gospel lesson today.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader in the local Jewish community. That means that he was a peer of Jesus’s harshest and fiercest critics, but something compelled him about Jesus, something inspired to learn more about what Jesus had to say and what Jesus stood for. So, he couldn’t let anyone he knew see him; he didn’t want anyone to find out he was curious about the message that Jesus was teaching, so he went in secret. He was afraid of what people might say, but he recognized that something was different about Jesus, that there was something genuine and special about him, for he said, “no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” But when Jesus told him that one must be born from above, he was puzzled, because he was thinking of a physical re-birth, of coming out of one’s mother’s womb again, which is impossible. Rather, Jesus was talking about a spiritual rebirth. Being born again from above. “What is born of the flesh is flesh,” but “what is born of spirit is spirit.” A rebirth, a renewing and reorienting of one’s mind, and heart, and very soul toward things that demonstrate that we are indeed created in the image of God.

Nicodemus asked, “But how can these things be?” This learned biblical scholar couldn’t understand what Jesus was talking about, so Jesus had to break it down even further, foreshadowing his own crucifixion by saying that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (a reference to a story in Numbers, Chapter 21, in which the lives of Israelites were saved from snakebites if they looked upon a bronze snake on a pole that God told Moses to make), he would have to be lifted up (on a cross) in order that all might have eternal life. And then, Jesus said those familiar words—words that sum up his whole reason for his being among us: “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.” Maybe Nicodemus needed some more time to piece it all together, but what Jesus said at the end of today’s Gospel lesson are words of comfort and hope. We hear those comfortable words every Sunday. And the hope is captured in verse 17, which says, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” See, it tells us that believing in Jesus

Christ is the key to eternal life, but the world isn't condemned by him but saved by it. There might even be some out there in the world who don't get the memo, who *don't* know Jesus the Christ, but the Gospel says that because of God's great love for humankind and by his mercy, even they have a shot at salvation, too.

The ironic thing is that, Christians often preach these words of spiritual rebirth and the hope of salvation through God's gift to us, and yet far too many people in this country and in the world get marginalized and put down by those same Christians. Too many get left out because they don't fit into a certain box, or they don't conform to certain expectations, or because they are different. Immigrants and foreign nationals—especially folks from certain countries—fear discrimination and deportation; our lesbian, gay, and transgender sisters and brothers fear social and political discrimination or being the victims of hate crimes; those of races other than white fear job, social, and economic discrimination; women continue to march for equal pay and rights to make monumental decisions concerning their health; our Jewish brothers and sisters are judged for their loyalty to God, the Creator; our Muslim brothers and sisters are vilified for devotion and obedience to Allah—the same omnipotent, omniscient, and merciful God we proclaim; and, our environment and the cosmos are in danger of destruction and corruption by human hands. There are too many in our very midst who are being told that they aren't loved, that they don't matter, but John 3:16 and 17 say that we all do! We all matter and we are all loved by God, because he let a part of himself suffer as one of us, be crucified as a criminal, and die just like all of his creation, so that we could become more like him, so that we could recognize that we have already been made his image. We already reflect what he's all about, regardless of who we are and where we come from.

What John 3:16-17 invite us to do is to seek out and recognize the many ways that God is at work in our lives and in the lives of others. It's not our business to condemn someone else because they're not like us, whatever that means. You can rest assured that there's at least one condemnable thing about each and every one of us, if you look hard enough. So, that's not it. Rather, Jesus let Nicodemus know, and reminds us still with these words, that we all have a shot at salvation and redemption. Those of us who got the divine e-mail are the ones responsible for sharing the good news, for telling the world that there is something to live for, something to hope for in Christ Jesus. We are the ones who are expected to live that out, so that others can be inspired to do the same. We have no business going around condemning folks when we have such an important message of hope to share. The world needs more hope, doesn't it? We're worrying about who's going to be sitting in the White House this time next year; we're worried if we're going to have enough to pay our bills; we're worried about the Coronavirus. The world needs more hope right now, but if we hear the words of Jesus, and handle our task as Christians properly, then hearts will be transformed, lives will be changed, and our brothers and sisters in this world will experience new life—a rebirth—and hold fast to the unchangeable truth of God's Word through him who is mighty to save, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Resources

Karoline Lewis, “Commentary on John 3:16” in <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4835>

David Lose, “Lent 2A: Just one more verse” in <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/03/lent-2-a-just-one-more-verse/>