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## The Second Sunday in Lent

March 5, 2023

### Jesus Is God's Gift Received by Faith

God's plan to save is universal. *All* have sinned and fall short of God's glory and *all* are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God's redemption is for all, but not all will be saved. The gift of God for all is received *by faith* in Christ alone. Faith, promise, grace—these three constitute an indivisible trinity. Only when we cease trying to work our way up to God, only where in faith we let God come all the way to us, only there can God's potent promise do its gracious work.

#### Sermon John 3:1-17

**Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."**

**Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."**

**"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"**

**Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."**

**"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.**

**"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."**

**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

Introduction – I'm not going out on a limb if I say—and I'm pretty sure all of you will agree—that the Bible passage which is most well-known is John 3:16. We heard it in the Gospel for this morning. If Christians are going to memorize one Bible passage, it's John 3:16. Truth is, Christians know the Bible reference as well as they know the passage. People who want to advertise Christianity at football games write John 3:16 on big cardboard signs and everybody knows what that means. Actually, you don't even have to use John's name; **3:16** is enough. Quarterback Tim Tebow wrote **3:16** on his eye black in a national championship game. Christian companies have

printed **3:16** on shopping bags and coffee cups. **3:16** is one of the most popular passwords for online sites. Christian churches save lots of money by displaying just the Bible reference in outreach materials. It works because everybody knows what **3:16** means.

Most of us learned John 3:16 in the King James Version: **For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.** The newer translations are just as faithful to the original. In those 25 words Jesus packed together God's plan to save the world. The passage makes four points. The phrases tell us about God's love, Jesus' work, the role of faith, and the prize of heaven. The Bible is filled with other passages that expand and explain each phrase and Christians have proclaimed and prayed and sung about each phrase in countless ways. But John 3:16 says all that needs to be said. Martin Luther called John 3:16 "the gospel in miniature." Some people call it "the gospel in a nutshell." A well-known Christian pastor described the verse as "a 25-word parade of hope." My father used to say in sermons that John 3:16 was enough to save a dying unbeliever from hell.

I'm sure you noticed that today's Gospel is more than John 3:16. The reading is actually John 3:1-17 and we could have read through verse 21. Jesus spoke 3:16 in the middle of conversation that not only proclaimed good news but exposed bad news. Jesus was reaching out to searcher but he was also striking back at an enemy. Last week the enemy was a serpent and Satan. Today the enemy is a teacher and a Pharisee. If we are really going to value Jesus, we need to understand his enemies because his enemies are our enemies. So let's take a look.

**1.** It was Passover time—early spring—and Jesus was in Jerusalem for the first time since he began his ministry. By this time, he had found followers up in Galilee and had come to Jerusalem to find followers in Judea. He was teaching and healing in the south just as he had in the north. John tells us that **many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name.**

But not everyone. The temple administrators were openly hostile. But not all of them. **There was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.** There were only 71 members in the Jewish ruling council, so Nicodemus must have been a highly respected teacher. He had been watching and listening; he wasn't anti-Jesus but he wasn't pro-Jesus either. **He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."** Jesus didn't take Nicodemus where Nicodemus wanted to go but he took Nicodemus where Nicodemus needed to go. **Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.** Nicodemus responded with a silly point about biology: **How can someone be born when they are old,** but that really wasn't the problem. The problem was that Nicodemus was absolutely, positively convinced that people gained the kingdom of God by obeying the laws of Moses and the Jewish fathers. Obedience was the heart and soul of his faith; for Nicodemus there was no other way to get right with God or gain any of God's blessings. That was the enemy Jesus was confronting and that was the enemy he needed to destroy in Nicodemus. Jesus said it again: **Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.** And here's why: **Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.** What Jesus said that night holds true this morning, for Nicodemus and for us. The sinful self inside us is the sinful self and the sinful self always separates us from God; it can't get us together with God. Only God can do that.

This was like physics or trigonometry to Nicodemus; this challenged everything he had ever known and believed. Jesus put him on the spot: **You are Israel's teacher and do you not understand these things?** There is a voice in each of us that is just as clueless as Nicodemus, The idea that we can't get ourselves right with God is just repugnant to us; it's an absolute turn off. Let me do something, God, even something small and insignificant. Let me make a decision for Christ, let my faith lead you to choose me, let me give up something for Lent. Just like Nicodemus, we ignore the obvious. **I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe,** Jesus said.

And just like Nicodemus we cannot believe the promise on our own. Jesus said, **How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?**

And right then Jesus opened up the heavens and shared the heavenly things with Nicodemus: **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.** Now there was something Nicodemus understood. When Israel was dying with disease in the desert, God ordered Moses to place a brass snake on a pole so that all who looked would live. Now the time had come when Jesus would place himself on a pole called a cross and all who looked to him would live forever. **For—and here it is—God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.** In these 25 words Jesus destroyed the enemy of pride and the enemy of doubt. Here is love so high that our guilt cannot approach it; redemption so complete that our sin cannot change it; faith so connected that Satan cannot break it; heaven so certain that we never have to doubt it. **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. God's promise is universal.** “Can I, will I forget how Love was born and burned its way into my heart—unasked, unforced, unearned, to die, to live, and not alone for me, to die, to live and not alone for me.”

2. So we wonder what Nicodemus was thinking as he walked home early that morning. Was he doubting? Was he struggling? Was he convinced? Something was changing. He began to see the kingdom of heaven. The Spirit was giving birth to spirit in his heart. Within a year he was defending Jesus in the Jewish council and enduring the council's mockery. Within two years he joined Joseph of Arimathea to move Jesus's dead body to a tomb and supplied 75 pounds of spices for the traditional embalming practices. He became a follower of Jesus by faith. But his countrymen and his colleagues did not. They encountered the same Jesus and heard the same truths. God's promise was for them as much as it was for Nicodemus, but they wanted nothing to do with it. Jesus shed his blood for them as he did for the world, but they refused to wash away their sins in the blood of the Lamb.

Jesus lived and died for everyone, but not everyone will see the kingdom of heaven. Some will see the kingdom of hell instead. **No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.** No one. There are voices in our society and even in some churches that are infuriated by the idea that rejection leads a person to hell. They are adamant that God will reward everyone. “We all worship the same God,” they say. “A loving God would not condemn anyone.” “All people are God's children.” Half-truths at best; lies at worst. This teaching is called **universalism**. God saves everyone no matter who are they or what they believe. But this is not what Jesus said. He said: **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

The enemy called universalism is an enemy that attacks us, too, and it affects us in more ways than we think. If God saves everyone, why do mission work? Why support mission work? Why sacrifice to support mission work? If water and the Spirit aren't important, why baptize babies or anyone for that matter? If faith isn't necessary or if faith is nothing more than a recollection of things learned in Sunday School, why hear the Word or receive the Sacrament? If we're all going to heaven anyway, why urge our children or invite our friends to worship with us? **God's promise is universal but God's promise is not universalism.** In these 25 words Jesus destroys this enemy for us and for the world.

John 3:16. The gospel in a nutshell. Here we find the love of God in Christ; here we find access to Christ in faith; here we find the source of faith in the Spirit and here we find the power of the Spirit in the Word and the sacraments. And with all that we find eternal life now and forever. Amen.