

Light Up

John 3:14-21

March 10, 2024 Fourth Sunday of Lent Series: *What are you UP to?*

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14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Humanity be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "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. 17 "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. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

New Revised Standard Version

First Nations Bible

14-15 This is what will happen to the True Human Being, so people will put their trust in him and have the life of the world to come that never fades away, full of beauty and harmony."

16 "The Great Spirit loves this world of human beings so deeply he gave us his Son — the only Son who fully represents him. All who trust in him and his way will not come to a bad end, but will have the life of the world to come that never fades away, full of beauty and harmony.

17 Creator did not send his Son to decide against the people of this world, but to set them free from the worthless ways of the world....

21 But the ones who are true and do what is right are walking in the daylight so others can clearly see they are walking with Creator."

Intro

There is no bible passage more known, recognized, beloved, despised and exhausted than John 3:16. You might have learned it in Sunday School. It is held up on signs from time to time by people at the sidelines of football games and can be found on bumper stickers, license plates, and printed on the bottom of the disposable cups from In-n-Out Burger. "John 3:16" - as though someone would go home or to a library or on the internet after eating their burger and look it up in a Bible and discover Christianity for the first time.

John 3:16 has become a kind of shorthand invitation to give your life to Christ, to have a conversion experience, so it comes with a lot of assumptions and baggage.

These are many things that come to mind for me when I hear John 3:16.

Context – Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night

What does not come to mind for me is Nicodemus. That story is the context for today's passage. This teacher of the faith, wise leader, who comes to Jesus - the one this gospel calls "the light of the world that the darkness cannot put out" - in the dead of the night, when nobody else can see him coming. And he sort of asks a question, or implies one, when he says something like, "Some of us think that you are from God..." with an unspoken yearning. Can't quite find the words.

And so Jesus begins talking about the kin-dom of God, and how one must be "born from above" in order to see it, as though God's kin-dom is so foreign it cannot be recognized by us as we are, in this world as it is, and also as though God's kingdom is somehow happening right here and now and we are missing it - not far away and in the future.

This conversation between Jesus and the Pharisee Nicodemus is multi-layered. Nicodemus is so concrete that he's confused by Jesus' metaphors. When Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be "born again," Nicodemus says, "Can one enter a second time the mother's womb?" And so Jesus pushes him gently: This is about newness, Nicodemus. As Joanne Whitt write, this is about letting go of old truths, old definitions, old traditions, old theological certainties, and allowing God to lead you into a new and open-ended, hope-filled future. (1)

And then Jesus says the most remarkable thing. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world...". The single most important thing to notice about this verse is that God loved the world. God deeply loved the world that God created, and God longs for this creation to live; this whole world, this whole creation, the whole cosmos. And this is the way God loved the world: God loved by giving this embodied love, this human-divine mystery that the world might be saved from a small life and death to abundant life. God wants to save the world; not individuals, not souls, this entire world.

Born of a crisis

John 3 is about crisis, but it takes the whole Nicodemus story to recognize the shape of it. It is not the crisis of God brooding in heaven waiting on us to make a choice, withholding a verdict on our souls until we walk the sawdust trail. The crisis of John 3—what set a bewildered Nicodemus exclaiming, "How can this be?"—is Jesus himself, the flesh-and-blood embodied Jesus, so close to Nicodemus that he can feel his breath as he speaks of "earthly things," of birth, water, and wind.

John says Jesus came because God loves the world, and not the lovable surface world of the world of carefree laughter on the verandas of the privileged, but Nicodemus's world. Though respectable on the surface, there is much in the world that is not of love or justice and peace. It's still the underbelly world of night, the God-hating world of violence, torture, rebellion, greed, and ego obsessed power.

Mysteriously, God loves this world. New Testament scholar John Meier observed that the standard English translations of John 3:16 obscure the “verbal and theological collision” captured in the Greek, which positions God right next to world, or cosmos—“for so loved God the world.” The point is clear: improbably, shockingly, God loves the actual world, the God-despising world. God loves the world with such ferocity that God draws near to offer abundant life, even to dwell among us in the flesh. “When God loves,” says Meier, “things happen: great things, terrible things, incarnation and cross.”

Presbyterian pastor and author John Buchanan wrote about a Sunday service at which he baptized a two-year-old child. He read the standard pronouncement from the prayer book: “You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever.” Unexpectedly, the child responded, “Uh-oh.”

Buchanan writes: “It was an appropriate response . . . a stunning theological affirmation.” Likewise, Nicodemus’s response to Jesus could be heard as a shocked “Uh-oh.” Moving politely toward Jesus with a spiritual theological inquiry, Nicodemus alarmingly finds Jesus moving toward him to rescue him, to transform him. (2)

Nicodemus comes to Jesus showing respect. But religions, writes one scholar, “don’t want your respect. They want . . . your soul.” Jesus, knowing Nicodemus is drowning in the churning night sea of fear, doesn’t want his respect; he wants his soul, his whole person reborn. Uh-oh.

By the end of John’s gospel, Nicodemus finally becomes the mirror image of Judas. At the beginning, Judas is called into the light, but in the end, the betrayer slips into the night. At the beginning, Nicodemus comes by night, but he finally moves, however hesitantly, toward the light, the word become flesh. Somehow it is fitting, then, that the last glimpse we have of Nicodemus in John 19:39 is not finding him in the company of scholars lecturing about spiritual truths but in the cemetery with a lavish amount of spice, caring tenderly and lovingly for the body of the one who came in the flesh to rescue him. *39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. 40 They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.*

Translating words

So maybe we too can be transformed. Maybe we can hear about the light that comes when we are open to this deep love. And we can hear the message more clearly. We hear the familiar words but as often is the case, something is lost in translation. The word translated in English “believe” in John’s Greek really meant “trust.”

For God so loved Jesus says, for God So deeply and fully loves this perishing world that God gave the only son... So the words that came to Nicodemus’s longing ears and hesitant heart,

was Whoever trusts in this God, whoever relaxes their being into the being of God, whoever finds their life in the life of the creator of all life will live!

For John, believing is not about knowing. It isn't signing on with your mind, accepting a set of facts you can argue. Believing is trusting, know that I am for you, open yourself to me, lean into me. Trust in me and you will find life everlasting. Jesus isn't selling Nicodemus a way to pretend we can prevent perishing, instead he is inviting him into a life that outlives even death.

Martin Luther King

Can we hear it in a new way? The familiarity of John 3:16 still can make me uncomfortable. When I do look beyond all the old packaging of this familiar verse, when I look to wise readers of the sacred text, I come face to face with a radical message written into John 3:16.

In September 1954, a young Martin Luther King Jr. moved from Boston to Montgomery, the city that would call him from the pulpit to the street, that would cement his call to follow Jesus into the work of justice. His first week in the pulpit at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, King preached on John 3:16. That first sermon in his new home bears signs of the voice that one year later would be heard all over the globe—of the man who would stand on the shoulders of Claudette Colvin, Rosa Parks, Jo Ann Robinson, and thousands of other Black women to lead the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956 that would help change the world.

“God’s love has breadth,” said King. “It is a big love; it’s a broad love. . . . God’s love is too big to be limited to a particular race. It is too big to be wrapped in a particularistic garment. It is too great to be encompassed by any single nation. God is a universal God.” In that Montgomery church, King told a different story of the God of this verse. “This [unlimited love] has been a ray of hope and has given a sense of belonging to the hundreds of disinherited people” who proclaim, like the enslaved preacher who risked everything to teach his enslaved congregants in the shadows of the plantation, “You ain’t no slave. . . . But you’re God’s child.” (3)

Many people do not know that the John 3:16 of King’s sermon exists. May we trust in this deep, broad love for all people. Trust in this Divine light in us and around us. May King’s words make this familiar verse into a renewed cry for God’s great love, a love big enough and vast enough to be for me, for us and for the whole of the world. Amen.

1) Rev. Joanne Whitt, “The Whole World,” 3/4/24 solvebywalking.com

[Solve By Walking - The Whole World](https://solvebywalking.com)

2) Thomas Long, Trinity Sunday, 5/27/18 [The Christian Century](https://www.christiancentury.org)

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/may-27>

3) Kerry Hasler-Brooks, March 14, Lent 4B, February 24, 2021, [The Christian Century](https://www.christiancentury.org)

<https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/march-14-lent-4b-john-3-14-21>

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, “God’s Love sermon,” in Stanford University archives

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/gods-love-sermon>