

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”^[b] 4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” 5 Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You^[c] must be born from above.’^[d] 8 The wind^[e] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

11 “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you^[f] do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^[g] 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ^[h]

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

Today’s passage contains the best-known Bible verse of all time, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Martin Luther called it the ‘Gospel in a nutshell.’ Sadly, it has become weaponized. Like so much of religion and society, we often talk in slogans that divide rather than unite us. There is a lesser-known verse that is just as important, if not more so, and it concludes this passage. 17 For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him,” which is one of my foundational Bible verses and is the heart of this passage and the gospel.

The Story

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, perhaps because he fears being seen by his compatriots. Would the other Pharisees and leaders get on him for meeting with Jesus? So, he comes to the light of the world at night.

Jesus, as the Word made flesh and the light of the world, gives us the essentials we need to know about God. Jesus is the light by which we see God. So, it is no accident that this story of Nicodemus occurs at night, contrasting Nicodemus, who thinks he knows but is really in the dark, with Jesus, who really knows and is the light of the world.

But Nicodemus does go to visit Jesus, so give him credit. He goes to see the one he knows is a great God-inspired teacher. He wants to know more, but he starts with flattery, and Jesus cuts him short. He thinks he knows about Jesus and the Kingdom. Jesus immediately begins telling him, "You do not really know all about me or the Kingdom." Jesus tells him, "To know about those things, you must be born again," or, from above, it is the same word in Greek. You must be born again is the popular expression.

Nicodemus is the greatest straight man of all time. He is like the old vaudeville set-up artist who allows the top banana to shine. His comments set the stage for Jesus' line, "You need to be born again to see the Kingdom of God." This beloved passage is often a slogan that serves as a dividing line of Christianity. You must be born again; we are told by many of the faithful.

For many of our Christian siblings, this has been the litmus test of true Christianity. It goes something like this: Can you identify the moment you were born again, received Christ into your life, and were saved? Did you get baptized and make a public profession of Christ's lordship? If you can't name the moment, you were born again, then your faith is suspect.

I have shared with you that I believe being born again is more of a process, a series of encounters with the living God. It is not so much something we do once. It is something we discover repeatedly. We can have new life not once, but time and again, as we discover God in our lives. We can commit and recommit to God. There can be a first time, but more are possible.

And even more, some people declare, "I have never known a time when I didn't have faith. I was raised in a faithful home by faithful parents." "I can't remember a time when Jesus wasn't there. This warns us to be careful with slogans and strictures, even those that sound religious and unnecessarily divide us.

So, Jesus tells Nicodemus that new birth is of God and is spiritual, and that you need to begin by looking at spiritual things. And this leads to the classic line John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. God loves the world.

Do you remember seeing this verse at sporting events? Perhaps it appeared on a banner, on a sign reading "John 3:16," or during attempts at extra points in football. Unfortunately, this verse also became a weapon used to divide us rather than a declaration of God's love. It was used in the theological wars, John 3:16. Yes or No, In or Out, Saved or Not. When I was in seminary, a young woman put it this way: John 3:16, yes or no, that's all we need. It's almost like we are challenged to answer yes or no, not only to the verse but also a particular understanding of it, to determine the

nature of our faithfulness, or if we even have any. It's a shame to see a verse given as reassurance for believers, weaponized to sort us into "them" and "us".

But wait, there's more.

Jimmy Buffet has a song called The Last Line declaring "Now is the time for the last line. And that is the heart of the passage, the last line, which, for me, is one of the highlights of my faith. Verse 17, the last line "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

This verse turns the question "Are you saved?" Into a declaration that you are saved. Even faith itself is not always a requirement for this salvation. God loves you. And this is true whether we believe it or not.

Remember, Jesus heals a man born blind who at first did not profess faith, as we will see in two weeks. Sometimes healing provokes faith, as it does for the man in that story with his sight restored.

And anyway, even our faith is a gift from God, as Ephesians 2:8-9 declares:

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

Faith is something God gives us, not something we do or earn. It tempers the exclusiveness of John 3:16's demand for belief with 3:17's purposeful inclusiveness.

And if this is God's ultimate purpose, to save the world, can't it be thwarted?" It is God's purpose to redeem the Cosmos, the universe that God created and loves. And God will bring that to fruition.

God's purpose is to redeem the created order, including all humans, and Jesus is the sign and seal of that promise. If it is God's purpose, I trust that God will make it so. As I have said before, Jesus is my captain and Christianity my ship; there are, I believe, other ships as well. As Jesus says, there are other sheep that are part of my flock. In John 10:16, he says:

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd.

God loved the world enough to give his son to save it, not to condemn it. It is God's initiative, decision, and action.

That is the heart of the gospel. God's love is gracious and not dependent on us or our opinion, or even the signs we wave. God didn't, and doesn't, consult us about loving the world. Jesus tells us God loves the world, and that is enough.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is the Cosmic Christ, present at the beginning with God, and indeed was the Word that God spoke, creating the Cosmos. Jesus is also the Word of God through whom God will bring the Cosmos home. The same Word that was God and was with God at creation

comes into the world and dwells with us as part of the master plan to redeem the cosmos. The one through whom the world was created is also the redeemer. And God will not rest until everyone is brought home.

Notice that all this wonderful expression of God's love comes during another act of love. Jesus stops what he is doing and takes time out to converse with Nicodemus. Jesus, the redeemer of the cosmos, sees part of that mission as stopping to take time to meet with this one person and try to lead him to see the light. And Jesus will stop for each of us as well. Individuals, in particular, not just people in general, are important to Jesus.

This is an aspect of the Good Shepherd we need to remember. Jesus loves his sheep, all of them, each of them. Each of us. He doesn't just love the world in general; he loves the individuals in it. Each week when I pronounce benediction, the blessing on the congregation, I declare that God loves you, God adores you, God treasures you, and you are held in God's very heart. God loves all of us and each of us, for that is the power of salvation that Jesus brings to us.

God loves the entire cosmos, but that love also extends to each of us as individuals; God loves us deeply, and I see that regularly in the stories of Jesus. He stops and takes time for individuals and crowds alike to share that love. In the next weeks, we will meet individuals whom Jesus stops for. A woman at the well, a man born blind, and Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are individuals whom Jesus loves.

So, God sent Jesus into the world to redeem it, and part of doing that is loving and redeeming each of us as well. God won't rest until we all are brought home.

17 "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."