

For Us, Not Against Us
John 3:1-17

Second Sunday in Lent/ 8th March 2020

The reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) claimed that John 3:16 is “the gospel in miniature.” He felt this one verse summarized the good news. It’s probably the best-known verse in the Bible, even for people who know nothing about scripture or about Christ. You probably have it memorized.

We find it everywhere. It’s emblazoned on banners at televised sporting events. As the camera pans the playing field and stadium there’s bound to be a “John 3:16” somewhere. We find it on tattoos, t-shirts, necklaces, key chains, all kinds of Christian-kitsch. It’s found on billboards, painted on the sides of old warehouses. I once saw a photo of a large billboard that read: STATE LINE STORE (I believe along the Georgia border), FIRST CHANCE LOTTERY. STOP. QUICK CASH. PLAY HERE. And in the lower right hand corner of the sign, there it is: John 3:16. Did you know that the In-N-Out Burger chain of drive-thru restaurants has John 3:16 in tiny red print on the inside rim of the bottom of their beverage cups?

It’s probably the most-cited verse of the Bible and almost always taken out of context.

Ask yourself: is it really wise to expect one verse to carry the full weight of God’s good news? The gospel can’t be reduced to one verse or a soundbite or a 30-character Tweet. Sure, there’s a lot of good news in this verse. But why do we stop at 3:16? What if we released our focus on 3:16, zoomed out, and looked at what’s all around this verse?

We quickly see that 3:17 might be just as important: “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.” Isn’t this an important part of the gospel message? Zoom out some more and we see that John 3:16 and 17 are really connected to what Jesus says about Moses and a serpent in John 3:14 and 15. These verses are also significant and often overlooked. And while we’re at it, go back to the beginning of the chapter to see Nicodemus searching for Jesus at night and Jesus saying to him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” or “born again” (John 3:3).

Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, arrives at Jesus’ home under the cover at night, in secret. Our Nic at Night. We know he’s searching after God’s kingdom. It’s implied in Jesus’ words to him: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” or as the King James Version puts it, “born-again.” Both are correct.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t get it because Jesus is using a metaphor and Nic being literal. His literal frame of reference prevents him from seeing God’s kingdom, prevents him from seeing the *purpose* of the kingdom. So Jesus proceeds with an analogy. “The wind 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” (John 3:8).

And what does Nicodemus say? “How can these things be?”

And it’s *that* response, that attitude in Nic (and within all of us) that snuffs out the Spirit, squelches the Spirit, and eclipses, blinds us from seeing the work of God’s kingdom through Jesus Christ. “How can these things be?” closes off the possibility of change and transformation, hinders us from standing in awe and amazement before the power and love of God, prevents us from seeing all the marvelous ways God is at work in the world, *now*, for the world, *now*.

The truth is: we ought to be always praying for new eyes. We need new eyes to see God’s way. That’s because God’s way doesn’t come naturally to us. Nor is God’s way what we ordinarily expect. We need the Spirit to teach us. That’s what Jesus means by being born again, or more correctly born “from above,” that is, with God’s aid. And it’s a birthing that doesn’t happen only once, but again and again. Being born again or from above doesn’t happen because we “believe,” but because the Spirit is moving through us.

When the Spirit blows through us we are born again and again and again, born from above again and again. And this is necessary because we are usually closed-minded, we are stuck in our ways, stubborn in our attitudes and beliefs so that we need to be blown into the kingdom. We need to be shocked into awareness. Sometimes we need startling images, maybe even obscure, bizarre metaphors, like the story of the time snakes were lifted up on a pole. Jesus reaches back to an obscure reference in Numbers 21, from an experience of Moses and the people in the wilderness. They were being bitten by poisonous snakes. So, God told Moses to put a bronze serpent up on a pole and every time someone was bit, they were to look at the snake and live (Number 21:1-9). Jesus refers to the wilderness experience as a way to talk about his own death—“lifted up” on a cross for all to look and to live—and what his death will come to mean, the salvation of the world. It’s really the core of the chapter. Yet, isn’t it amazing how we often pass over John 3:14 and 15? But we need bizarre metaphors and stories of snakes to wake us from what could call our Nicodemean slumber.¹ We need “strange stories” to help us apprehend what God is doing in the lifting up of his Son upon a cross.

What do snakes and the cross have in common? We often associate snakes with the devil or evil. But in many cultures and religions the snake is a symbol of transformation. We could say, “*When the gospel of God’s love is lifted up among us, it draws out all of our venom and all that poisons the world.* The glory of God’s eternal love for you, for me, and for the world only touches the earth through a cross – amid the vipers and the venom.”² Jesus wants Nicodemus to break free from his limited understanding and limiting frame of reference to look at the One who will be lifted up in order to draw us out and into the wider framework of God’s redemptive purpose and love for the world.

For the one who looks at him and sees in him the very love of God will live, truly live, will have “eternal life,” which does not only mean life ever after, but a life informed by and shaped by the eternal, that is, by God. Eternal life or life touched by eternity is always new life, a born-from-above-again-and-again-life. That’s why we can’t skip over the snake story. To do so is to skip over the cross. In fact, John’s entire Gospel is organized to focus our eyes upon the one lifted up (John 12:32), for the one lifted up will draw all people to himself.

The good news of this text is that the focus should not be on us, on what *we* need to believe and whether or not we have enough belief. Sure, we're included in the text, of course, because it involves our salvation. But it's not really about us at all. If you focus only on John 3:16, then it's easy to think it is all about us, about what we have to do, what we have to believe about Jesus in order to have eternal life. Instead, it's really about the cross. It's about Jesus being lifted up for us. It's about what God is doing for us through him on a cross, whether we believe or not. For us, never against us, but for the sake of the world.³

“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.” Imagine if John 3:17 was emblazoned everywhere?

All this is done for the *world*—meaning, for everything that works against God, and everything that fights against God, and everything that hates God (there are so many ways to hate God). All of this is done for the love of a world at odds with love, a world at odds with its Creator. Jesus goes to the cross to redeem a world and demonstrate to the world the wide reach of God's amazing love and grace. For, as John wrote later in his Gospel, “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1b).

The light of his love continues to illumine a world at odds with itself and God, a light that no darkness can ever extinguish, extending light in the darkest places. God's love is the light of the world, a love that grows in intensity and shines brightest in the places of greatest human need and suffering.

The gospel, the good news is not only in 3:16—it's shining all through the text! And when the Spirit blows through us and we are given eyes to see the love of God high and lifted up we are brought to life, again and again and again.

¹ Kenneth E. Kovacs, *Lectionary Homiletics* (Vol. XX, No. 2), February-March 2009, 68.

² James F. Kay, “John 3:16,” *Seasons of Grace: Reflections from the Christian Year*. Foreword by Thomas G. Long (Eerdmans, 1994), 51.

³ I am grateful to my friend David A. Davis for his reflection on this text. *Lectionary Homiletics* (Vol. XX, No. 2), February-March 2009, 70.