

John 3:1-17

³Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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 apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus 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?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The 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.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

God of signs and wonders, we come to your word again and again, seeking understanding and the new life it offers. By the power of your Holy Spirit, illumine our hearts and minds so that we may believe this testimony and have eternal life. In the name of Jesus Christ, our teacher and Savior, we pray. Amen.

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.

This is one of the most beloved verses in the Bible. It is, for example, the verse that has been lifted up at countless football games. If you are a football fan you have probably seen “John 3:16” displayed on a large poster by someone sitting in the end-zone section, so that during field-goal attempts it might be seen on national TV.

No doubt the person displaying the John 3:16 poster at a football game is thinking of evangelism, hoping to spread the Word so that others might be led to read the Bible and discover the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

But then there is also a hidden message when John 3:16 is lifted up and pulled out of context as a stand-alone verse. The verse has been used to make distinctions between those who believe, and those who don’t; between those who believe, and those who are not sure what it means to believe in Jesus.

John 3:16 has been used to define the in-crowd who are, in their language, “saved,” thus suggesting that everyone else is going to hell. See how easy this verse can be used for an ***us versus them*** judgment. I know of someone who told a friend of mine that they should come to his church so they would be sure to have a place in heaven.

In this way, that single verse, John 3:16, has been used to draw a line between believing Christians and everyone else. While some might argue that the “line drawing” defines the mission field, and where the work needs to be done. It also reveals a certain arrogance of those who presume they know the mind of God.

We are always in danger of this kind of distorted theology when we read small sections of scripture and assume they mean what we want them to mean. Actually that’s not theology at all, it’s proof-texting; which is the process of looking for a passage of scripture that agrees, and therefore proves, our own belief; I’ve done it myself. In proof-texting, we begin with ***our own*** particular understanding and then use the Bible to prove ***we*** are right. In truth, the Bible can be used to support virtually *any* belief.

To be faithful in our seeking after God, we must read John 3:16 within its context, especially the very next verse, John 3:17: ***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.***

Here we see that Jesus’ purpose was not condemnation, but salvation. And most importantly, the scope of Jesus’ salvific work included the ***whole world***, because...God so loved ***the world***. If our calling is to follow Jesus, we need to take seriously the breadth of Jesus’ ministry. I don’t believe that Jesus ever turned anyone away. Jesus showed everyone he met the way of kingdom of God. Some, we know, could not follow him and went away sad, but they all received the invitation.

And here is where I want to tell you that you are all theologians! If you wonder about God; if you look for God in your life; if you suspect that God is at work in you, and in people you know, or people you meet; if you have conversations with God, and sometimes call it prayer... then you are a theologian, for theologians are those who seek to know God.

As theologians, we all have our own unique way of seeing God. And here's a very important point: there's no right or wrong way of seeing God. There are only those ways we haven't discovered yet.

And let me tell you about what we do on Tuesday nights in the Faith Formation Group, for it is a place we can share our theology, our particular way of seeing God. And we are definitely not there to judge anyone's theology, or the way each one may express their understanding of God. Rather, our sharing is seen as an opportunity to get to know each other. More importantly, when someone shares their experience, it is an opportunity for all of us to expand our understanding of God.

Now we are not perfect, and we get defensive sometimes, and we disagree, but it is okay to disagree. When we are sharing our personal experience of God, we do not judge each other, or tell someone they are wrong. We are all on a journey and we need each other as we learn, day by day, to trust God, the God of Moses who in ancient times led the people from slavery to freedom; it too was a journey lead by the Spirit; a journey of discovery.

Let's remember that the people of Israel had much to learn! It was during their journey through the wilderness that the people became anxious and afraid, and complained to Moses that they were better off as slaves in Egypt. They did not trust God, and they put God to the test. It took time for the people to believe in God's presence and trust that God was always with them.

In the episode referred to in our lesson today, the people of Israel became so contentious that the Lord sent fiery serpents. The people who were bitten by the poisonous snakes died. In their panic they confessed their sin and begged Moses to intervene on their behalf before God. God gave the remedy for those who were bitten by the snakes, and the people began to learn who God was for them, and they slowly began to trust God.

It took the people 40 years of wandering in the wilderness to become a people of God. God loved them and showed them what God required of them. The road we must walk to become God's people is also a long one. Coming to believe is a life-long process. We are constantly learning to trust God and grow in our belief.

It was the same for Nicodemus. He came to Jesus thinking he knew who Jesus was (a teacher come from God). His knowledge turned out to be a handicap, for he could not understand what Jesus was telling him; he could not hear the invitation to new life that Jesus was offering. Nicodemus was stuck in his old, literal way of seeing, and thus he was not open to the gift of the Spirit.

Nicodemus's world was carefully constructed and predictable. Thus he was unable to understand Jesus' invitation to be born into the Spirit of God. The Spirit is wild and blows where it wills; it leads us into the unknown and mysterious. Nicodemus must have been afraid.

This lesson challenges each one of us to consider our own fears, and the ways we are not ready to receive the Spirit of new life that will take us to places we've never been before. We rather like predictability. We rather like knowing where we stand. But Jesus calls us to be born into the Spirit, the same wild Spirit that led the Israelites from bondage to freedom in the Promised Land. This is the Spirit of life, this wild and powerful Spirit calling *us* to see with new eyes the freedom of God's realm.

Through this eternal, living Spirit, Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on his staff and the people who looked upon it after being bitten were saved. This is the same wild and powerful Spirit that was with Jesus when he was lifted up on a wooden cross. And those who believed in him have been touched by that same Spirit, being reborn to know a new kind of life, not just the life of those who are revived, but life in a new dimension, the very realm of God, the perfect and eternal realm of God, where we swim in an ocean of God.

Jesus still invites us to step out of our comfort zone to be born into the Spirit that blows where it wills, mysteriously, and powerfully. The Spirit challenges us to be open to new ways of being alive. Are we ready? O Lord, have mercy. Amen.

