

Sermon for Sunday - March 5 – Lent 2
John 3:1-16

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the wonderings of our minds reveal your wisdom in our time, God of life and light. Amen

This is a difficult passage for me, and I almost passed it by, given I can make those kind of choices. I don't much like this passage because it has a reputation. We are hard to pressed to watch a Baseball, Basketball, or Hockey game without someone in the crowd holding up a sign reading John 3:16. They would no doubt argue that John 3:16 is the gospel in a nutshell – they might be right and/or they might be missing something.

The ones with the signs are the ones who often ask you if you have taken the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour. These are the ones who would cast their eyes to the ground when you cannot sight the date and time of your conversion. It is as if they know where you are going and they cast their eyes down to indicate that which cannot be spoken. These are the ones who despair over the state of our souls and the direction we are headed after our demise. I am uncomfortable around this perspective of God - it feels heavy with judgement upon those of us who have a different understanding of how to be in relationship with God and so I squirm a bit when I hear this passage.

I think I have uttered the supposed magic formula for salvation and right relationship with God - twice in my life. Once when I was 10 years old - one evening at a "Pioneer Girl's" meeting – Pioneer Girl's was sort of like Brownies but with bible verses to memorize. My Pioneer Girl's, group leader asked if I was saved and because I wasn't sure, she asked me to accept Jesus into my life – she told me what to say – and I repeated her words – now the heaven's didn't open nor where their angels voices but it

made “Kermit” (that was her nickname) my leader happy and I liked her so it was nice.

The second time I uttered the special formula for salvation was when I was just 18. I was on a trip to Disneyland with the Youth for Christ organization. During one of the evening sessions, where they gathered all the kids together for games and speeches - one of the presenters scared most of us into getting down on our knees - none of us wanted to go to Hell. Again, after reciting the prescribed formula there were no open heavens or angels singing but I did sleep better knowing that if I died during the night, I would be okay somehow.

There is a load of baggage that comes along with this passage from John. But my dislike for the lesson doesn't come from the lesson itself but rather from the way it is often used as a way to frighten and suggest that there is only **one way** to be in relationship with God. Now maybe there is only one way, but Scripture seems to suggest differently.

The good news that John preaches – which is where our lesson this morning is found - John's Gospel seems fundamentally different from the good news that Matthew, Mark, and Luke preach in theirs. In John's Gospel there is a lot of talk about believing specifically in Jesus.

But if you turn back a few pages to the Gospel of Mark you find a different emphasis. Mark's Jesus - after he has been baptized and tempted in the wilderness - makes his way to Galilee where he talks about God's Kingdom being nearby. In Mark's Gospel and in Matthew and Luke it becomes clear that living the “gospel”, or “Jesus way”, is what brings us life – not in the future after death - but now. // In these gospels “Jesus Way” is not “pie in the sky, by and by, but something sound, on the ground, while we're still around.

Now if you turn forward a few pages to Paul's letter to the Romans you will find a different gospel altogether. Paul seldom refers to the Kingdom of God. He rarely mentions heaven or everlasting life. The good news for him is about being set free from the Law, about being saved by grace. We find these words in Paul's letter to the Romans:

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This was good news for Martin Luther, who became a monk as a way of trying to earn his salvation before he came to believe that salvation comes by grace. And it was good news for John Wesley, who after years of wondering if he was really a Christian found his heart "strangely warmed" when he heard someone preach from the book of Romans. John Gospel's perspective seems to be one of many.

So together let us look at John's gospel lesson not to find answers but rather to find wisdom. Today we read about a remarkable exchange between Jesus and a interesting man.

"... a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council."

Nicodemus is introduced to us as an important, powerful person. We are told nothing about him except for his resume as a member of the "ruling council." Notably, "He came to Jesus at night." Remember, this was before the days of electric lighting. It's dark, very dark.

Why didn't Nicodemus show up for one of Jesus' teaching sessions in broad daylight? I wonder if it was because he was embarrassed to be seen with Jesus. After all, Nic is an important religious leader. He can't be

seen as spending time with a simple country preacher. As a powerful person with authority, he is somebody in the know. I think he's not coming to learn from Jesus, in his nocturnal, secret visit. He's there to show off what he knows before Jesus.

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God."

See? - He uses the royal **"We** know."

Then he flatters Jesus with,

"For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

I guess that Nicodemus expects Jesus to be flattered, that he, powerful and informed person that he is, has judged Jesus to be a "teacher who has come from God." But Jesus isn't buying it.

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

Smart, informed, influential Nicodemus, in a just a couple of minutes of conversation with Jesus, becomes thoroughly baffled.

"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!" Nicodemus' question goes unanswered.

Mr. Religious Leader, Mr. Knowledgeable and Well-Informed - Nicodemus is suddenly the clueless, befuddled, undergrad. Jesus has no problem leaving Nicodemus confused and muddled. He's in no hurry to get the Pharisee to sign on a dotted line or get him to conform to some formula. "The spirit blows where it chooses"; Jesus says. The Spirit cannot be caged or contained. Which means the journey of faith and the working of salvation can't be caged or contained, either. When we speak of God's Kingdom, we are in a realm of mystery. It's OK to be surprised. It's OK to be confused.

Anybody here know what it's like to have a sure, firm grasp upon who Jesus is and what our faith is all about only to discover that when life throws us a curve ball we haven't the foggiest idea of who Jesus is or where God is? I think we have all been, surprised, and confused along this road of faith and belief. I think today's lesson is inviting us to remember that the next time we are thrown for a loop and we feel a little lost. Let us lean into this scripture lesson with an openness to its wisdom and good news. Which is not about getting faith right but rather opening our hearts.

Let us listen again to what Jesus said to Nicodemus.

For God so loved. Loved the world. That God gave. That whoever believes should not perish. Jesus came not to condemn but to save.

For God so loved. Loved the world. That God gave.

When it comes down to it, for Nicodemus, for me, for you, that's all that matters.

God so loved. Loved the world. That God gave.

In the midst our Lenten journey, in the midst of our questions and our uncertainties. Let us trust our God.

Who loves - loves the world, and who gives.

Amen