

## Year A Lent 2 God So Loves the World John 3 vv1 to 17

This gospel story contains one of the most familiar and well-loved passages of the bible: "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life". Many Christians, and even many of those who don't consider themselves Christians, have at least a passing familiarity with this verse. It continues with: "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".

Of the people who could do a decent job of quoting this passage, there would likely be a lot fewer who would be able to tell you what story it is from – and it is the context of the story that really provides a fuller understanding of John's message and how exciting this message is for us many centuries later.

John is influenced by the ideas of the Greek philosopher, Plato, and his students which is why John talks about the universe as if it is two-storied – having an upper and lower floor. The lower story is the "world" – a place of darkness and hate, lies and slavery...and death. Things of the world die. So when John talks of the world and says of some people that they belong to the world, he is talking not of the fact that we are human or of the natural earth we live in, he is talking of the darkness, the negative side of humanity and the consequences brought about by human darkness. Those living in darkness only have a partial knowledge of God – or none at all.

In contrast, the upper story is heaven, centred around God – a realm of life and light, freedom, truth, and abundance. Eternal life is a quality of heaven found in knowing God. God shows us the possibility of heaven through Jesus.

It would be easy, from this separation of the "world" and "heaven" – dark and light – not knowing vs. knowing God – to fall into the thinking that the bad world is going to be completely destroyed, annihilated by God...and all of the good people who believe

in Jesus are going to go to heaven to live with God. To believe this is to fall in line with mainstream thinking that ignores some glaring information to the contrary: God sent Jesus not to condemn the world but to save the world. Remember that by “world”, John is not only referring to the people and other earthly things but to all of the brokenness. The Greek word “save” – *anothen* – means to rescue, to heal, to make whole.

Despite the brokenness in ourselves, creating systems of brokenness in the world, seemingly insurmountable problems like poverty, inequality, hatred for people who are different, and so on...God loves the world, John tells us. God loves all of God’s creation and desires to heal it. To do this God sends his Son.

This is exciting to know – Jesus came to make us and the world whole. *How* this is accomplished is a part of the other bit of exciting news in this story – the news that should make us giddy with joy and bounce out of here unable to keep it to ourselves. What is this news? Let’s explore, more closely, what is happening in this story.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of the darkness of the night. This is our signal that, although Nicodemus is curious about Jesus and knows he must come from God because of the amazing things he is doing, Nicodemus’ knowledge is partial, he has an incomplete understanding of Jesus. It also tells us that Nicodemus does not want the rest of people to know he is visiting Jesus on behalf of the other curious, partially knowledgeable religious leaders.

Jesus provides to Nicodemus, to John’s first listeners and readers, and to us, what we must do to complete our knowledge, to be in right relationship with God. As a Pharisee and leader of the Jewish people, Nicodemus would be striving to be in relationship with God and guide the people in their relationship with God. In order to be in relationship with God, in a relationship leading to eternal life in God’s kingdom, Jesus tells

Nicodemus – and us – that we must be born from above. The Greek word that John writes can mean both “above” and “again”. Nicodemus latches onto the “again” option – and misses the “above” option – so that John can drive home to us Nicodemus’ partial, incomplete understanding of Jesus and his teachings.

To be born from above is accomplished through being born of water and the Spirit, Jesus explains. But, what happens after we have been born from above? To be born from above – born of water and the Spirit – is to see God’s kingdom and to enter into God’s kingdom. It is to have the life and the light, the truth and the abundance of God’s kingdom – to completely change how we operate in the current brokenness of the world and to be able to perceive God’s work in the world. Those who place their trust in Jesus will have eternal life, being reborn from above by water and the Spirit. The Greek word for Spirit is *pneuma* and *pneuma* can mean “spirit,” “breath,” and “wind.” Jesus plays with these multiple meanings. Like the breath of God in Genesis 2, the Spirit gives life to believers. Like the wind, God’s Spirit blows wherever it wishes, and though observers may know its presence, they do not understand it and they do not control it. It is free. Amazingly, Jesus says that those who are born of the Spirit share in the Spirit’s mysterious freedom (John 3:8). God’s freedom – true freedom – is to be free from the trappings, the lures, the power struggles of the world. It is being free to love and show compassion, to freely give, freely share, freely help. I have shared, on the back of a bulletin, the following description of freedom. It makes a vivid point. In *One Minute Wisdom*, Anthony de Mello writes:

It intrigued the disciples that  
the Master who lived so simply  
would not condemn his wealthy followers.

“It is rare but not impossible for someone to be rich and holy,”  
he said one day.

“How?”

“When money has the effect on [your] heart that the shadow of that bamboo has on the courtyard.”

The disciples turned to watch  
The bamboo’s shadow sweep the  
courtyard without stirring a  
single particle of dust. (p.83)

When Nicodemus continues to question how what Jesus is saying could possibly be true, could possibly happen, Jesus assures him that he knows what he is talking about and is the one able to accomplish the giving of the gift of the Spirit, the gift allowing us to see and to enter God’s kingdom. “Jesus is both the only Son of God and the human one, the Son of Man. He explains to Nicodemus that he descended from heaven and has ascended to heaven, thus connecting heaven and earth. He remains in constant contact with God the Sender, revealing God by bearing witness to what he has seen and known. Like the serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness (see Numbers 21:4–9), Jesus will be lifted up both to expose human sinfulness – the brokenness that comes from life not in relationship with God – and to save people from [the] deadly effects [of this lack of relationship]. Here as elsewhere in John, ‘lifted up’ refers to the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus as a single whole (see John 8:28; 12:32, 34)” (Judith Jones, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).

Jesus describes the gift of new life in relationship with God, this life of light, freedom, truth, and abundance, in two ways – this new life, he says, is eternal life *and* it is seeing and entering the kingdom of God. It is two different ways of describing the same life with God. Eternal life is completely a gift of God’s love. “It is not simply life in heaven after death. It begins now, in the moment that [we] entrust [our] lives to Jesus” (Judith Jones, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). This is the news that should have us exuberant with joy,

bouncing out the door to share this amazing news. When we are given the gift of eternal life through the gift of the Holy Spirit at baptism, we enter into God's reign in the here and now. We are citizens of God's kingdom, Paul writes, eagerly awaiting Jesus' return (Philippians 3:20-21). Eternal life is not only a gift of God's love but it is also shaped by God's love – we live, now, in God's kingdom according to the rules of God's love and depending on the Spirit's guidance. Citizenship in God's kingdom is not a solo flight. We are born anew into Christ's body, working together, living together as God's family.

Jesus invites all of us to accept God's gift of life, to be in the world but not of the world – to live among the brokenness, the darkness but to be embraced by the light of God's love. In Jesus we see God's love. In just a few weeks we will see God's love scorned and rejected but triumphant. This is important hope for us to hold onto amid a world that still scorns and rejects God's love. We bear God's Spirit, God's love, into a world that often turns its back on us yet we shine the light of eternal life with God, we reveal the light of life in God's kingdom, and God's love will be triumphant. We are born anew from above and we will be made whole, living as participants in God's creation made whole...because God so loves the world.