

## Year B Trinity Sunday 2024 For God So Loved the World Jn3 1 to 17

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. 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.

That is one of the most well-known passages of all of Scripture. God desires to bring healing and wholeness to the world, to give all believers eternal life through belief in Jesus Christ. Many, many Christians around the world could quote this bit of Scripture for you, especially John 3:16... "For God so loved the world..." But, a large chunk of those Christians would not be able to tell you what comes before and after that famous quotation. Most would not be able to tell you that it is a part of the story of Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus. That story, what Jesus says to Nicodemus, is really important though. It tells us what it means to be saved. It tells us what having eternal life means and, perhaps most importantly, how this is accomplished. Let's listen in...

The Pharisee, Nicodemus, comes to Jesus by night. In John's gospel, this doesn't necessarily mean that Nicodemus doesn't want to be seen. I learned recently from historian and brother in the Society of St. John the Evangelist, James Koester, that it was actually quite common to have discussion and debate in the night hours because, without electricity, the wake/sleep rhythm was different. Settling for the night when the sun went down meant waking for a few hours to have conversations not able to be held during the busyness of the work day and then sleeping again until sunrise. More importantly, though, in John's gospel, darkness is associated with not knowing or not understanding what Jesus is all

about. We see both the not knowing and the not understanding in this passage. Nicodemus opens by speaking some things about Jesus that seem quite complimentary. He says, “we know you are a teacher who has come from God.” Nicodemus has seen at least some signs and wonders from Jesus and knows God must be with this young miracle worker. Jesus’ answer seems strangely unrelated. Nicodemus has just acknowledged Jesus as a teacher who has God’s blessing and Jesus responds by telling him that nobody can see the kingdom of God unless they are born from above. Jesus seems to be on a completely different train of thought but, what Jesus has done, is reveal that Nicodemus does not know who he truly is.

Nicodemus does not know that Jesus is God’s Son, the Messiah sent to reconcile the world to God. Nicodemus thinks Jesus is a teacher and prophet, working signs and wonders on behalf of God. Jesus tells him he is much more than that. Jesus is born from above. Jesus sees the kingdom that Nicodemus longs to see.

Nicodemus misunderstands what Jesus means when he says, “born from above” because the word Jesus uses can also mean born “anew” or “again” and so Nicodemus thinks that Jesus is telling him he must actually physically be born a second time. Jesus explains further saying that born from above means born of water and the Spirit, becoming children of God – they will be the ones to see the kingdom of God.

Jesus seems to get off track again when he starts talking about the wind. Wind and Spirit, however, are the same word in Greek. The Spirit, Jesus tells him, goes where he chooses and we don’t know his comings and goings. The Spirit is a mysterious power, a continuous power, a power who is with those born of the

Spirit. Nicodemus is at a loss – to be born from above by water and the Spirit escapes his understanding and Jesus just shakes his head. You're a teacher of Israel, Jesus says, and you don't understand these things?

Nicodemus would have known about baptism for the cleansing of sin like what John the Baptist had done. He would have known that gentiles who converted to Judaism were baptized and compared to new born infants. Nicodemus would have known that, beginning with King David, the anointed kings of Israel were hailed as God's sons. He would have known that Jewish people expected the Day of the Lord in the end times when God would pour out his Spirit on his people and they would all be his sons and daughters. What Nicodemus just couldn't piece together though, was how Jesus could be offering this to him now.

The kingdom is here, Jesus says. I've seen it, he says. You can be born from above. But it's not the end times, Nicodemus thinks. This is not the Day of the Lord. Nicodemus cannot piece it together because he does not know or understand who Jesus is. He does not know or understand God's plan for saving the world.

Jesus spells it out for him – and for us – beginning with a story that Nicodemus knows well. When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness being rebellious and just not understanding how to leave behind their old broken way of life to live according to God's ways, they were being bitten by poisonous snakes and were dying. Moses pleaded to God for them and God took pity on them. God told Moses to create the image of a snake, put it on a pole and lift it up for everyone to see. Everyone who looked at it would be healed. Jesus explains that he, too, will be lifted up in order to heal the world. Jesus lifted up all of the world's brokenness with him – the greed, selfishness, the inequality and injustices

handed out by the powerful represented by the Jewish and Roman leaders who put him on the cross. In the battle between the brokenness of the world's power who put him there and God's power of absolute goodness it was God's goodness that won. For, not only is Jesus lifted up on the cross where everyone can see his love, he is also lifted up from death – defeating the power of sin and death, and then he is lifted up into heaven so that, through the gift of the Spirit, he can be with everyone, everywhere, at every time.

God so loved the world that he gave us his Son to bring us the kingdom, to defeat death, to give us the gift of the Holy Spirit. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin tells us, “It is in Jesus that God's kingdom is present in the life of the world, and this presence is continued - under the sign of the cross - in the community that confesses Jesus as Lord and belongs to him as his body” (The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission [Kindle Locations 1656-1657]). We are that community, the Church. Newbigin describes the Church as “a movement launched into the life of the world to bear in its own life God's gift of peace for the life of the world. It is sent, therefore, not only to proclaim the kingdom but to bear in its own life the presence of the kingdom” (Kindle Locations 671-672). The Church is born in the mystery of baptism – born of water and the Spirit. Cleansed in water, participating in Christ's death and resurrection, anointed with the Holy Spirit, made children of God, members of Christ's body, bearers of God's kingdom to the world. We know what Nicodemus did not know. We understand what Nicodemus could not understand. Jesus offers these things to us now. In baptism, we accepted them – we are born from above by water and the Spirit, we are children of God, and we live in God's kingdom. We have eternal life now. As I explained a few weeks ago, the word “eternal” is the description of the time period, like the Bronze Age or

the Industrial Age. Eternal is a quality not a quantity. Eternal life means living a present life immersed in God.

So, living with God in God's kingdom now, we await the eventual perfection of God's kingdom – including our perfection. We bear an awesome gift and an awesome responsibility. Newbigin points out that, through most of its history, the Church has been a weak, divided, and often unsuccessful community. "But," he goes on to say, "because it is the community that lives by and bears witness to the risen life of the crucified Lord, it is the place where the reign of God is actually present and at work in the midst of history, and where the mission of Jesus is being accomplished" (Kindle Locations 745-747). We are a community of believers, joined at the font. This is a unity we celebrate each time we come together at God's table – our ritual that is the repeatable part of our baptismal oath. As members of Christ's body, we are joined to God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Called to gather so that we may be sent, bearing God's gift of the kingdom, to the world.

Together, we are the Church and the church "is the place where the glory of God ("glory as of an only son") actually abides among us so that the love of God is available to all who choose it. This is the place where the promise of Jesus is fulfilled: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all [people] *sic* to myself" (John 12:32). As imperfect as we may be, the Spirit who blows where he chooses brings us along with him. The Spirit leads the church – opening doors that we obediently enter, sparking flames that we lovingly tend...for God so loved the world.