

Sermon for Sunday, January 25, 2026

John 3:1-21

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today's Scripture reading contains one of the most famous verses in the Bible. And we're going to get to this verse in a bit, but first I want to state the obvious. Jesus and Nicodemus do not understand each other. You could say that they "don't speak the same language." Jesus is trying to draw Nicodemus into a deeper spiritual understanding and Nicodemus can't go there.

Jesus calls Nicodemus a "teacher of Israel." That means Nicodemus is charged with teaching people about God and God's ways. In order to be "a teacher of Israel" he must be a learned and highly educated man. One would assume that he is capable of hearing Jesus' teaching and understanding that Jesus' words are not meant literally. Yet, that's exactly what he does in verse 4. And Jesus comes right back at him with a verse that is often misunderstood or perhaps even worse used as a weapon to scare and intimidate people. John 3:5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." From Nicodemus' response it is clear he doesn't understand what Jesus is saying but I would ask: do we? The common simplistic interpretation of this verse makes one think that it's all about being baptized and that nothing else matters!

But here's what's truly meant by this teaching: Jesus doesn't see baptism as an insurance policy to eternal life. Baptism is an initiation rite into the kingdom of God as it exists here on earth, in this present moment. The kingdom of God isn't thought of as life after death; the kingdom of God exists right now. The challenge then for any one of us is to open ourselves up to the presence of the Holy Spirit, and allow the Spirit to infuse our lives here and now so that we might work for the betterment of God's earthly kingdom and the people who live here on earth right now.

Kingdom of God moments can be like at the last Family Fun Night when I taught a bunch of kids and grownups the meaning of kindness based on the book "Extra Yarn." Kingdom of God moments can be when a small group of people gather around a table to eat soup and bread. Kingdom of God moments can be when people stand on street corners in Red Wing on a Friday

afternoon and protest the cruelties that are occurring in our state. Kingdom of God moments can be when thousands of people march through the streets of MPLS and protest the cruelties that are occurring in our state.

Is the kingdom of God perfect? No. Are the people who participate in these kingdom of God moments perfect? No. Do they fail, and at times fail miserably? Yes. And yet, somehow, God's light shines through our failures and dispels the darkness that sin imposes on us, on our spirits, and on our world. (*Pause*)

Now let's consider verses 14 and 15 which say, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." What OT story is Jesus referring to? What is Jesus talking about?

You might remember that after God frees the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and after they cross the Red Sea, they find themselves in the desert. They are hungry and they complain to Moses. That's when God begins to provide them with manna (a story we heard last fall). The Israelites get tired of eating manna all the time and start complaining to Moses about the food. Poisonous snakes invade the camp and start killing people. Then the people go "Oops. We messed up! Shouldn't have been complaining like that! Moses help us!" God tells Moses to make a bronze figure that looks like a snake and place it on a pole so that it can be seen from a distance. God instructs that anyone who looks at the serpent on the pole will live.

This is the only time in the NT when this OT story is mentioned. The purpose of this story is to remind us that we too must look up: not to a pole with a snake on it, but rather to Jesus hanging on a cross. The OT people who looked up at the snake and in doing so demonstrated their faith that God would save them survived. The NT people and that includes us, who look to Jesus hanging on the cross and believe in God's power to save us will live. Looking to the cross demonstrates our faith in the saving power of God through Jesus.

Which brings me to John 3:16, arguably the most famous verse in the Bible. "For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

God so loved the world.....that's not just us Scandinavian midwestern Minnesotans. God loved and continues to love the

entire population of the world. God sent his Son, a part of God's self to earth so that all those separated from God through sin might look to him and have life.

It's tempting to stop with verse 16, but we must hear verse 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." My friends God sent Jesus, God's Son into the world so that the world, and us, might be saved. This is not about condemnation. This is about LOVE. Out of God's great love for the world, God sent Jesus so that we might look upon him hanging upon the cross and be given life.

An important word in the gospel of John is the word "abide." God sent Jesus and Jesus abides with us through the power of the Holy Spirit. That means that Jesus sojourns or lives among us. Jesus is here with us right now. When we look up to Jesus on the cross a relationship of faith is formed. God commits to each of us as a parent commits to their child. That relationship exists wherever we are; wherever we find ourselves. Our earthly parents may fail; our earthly parents will die, but God doesn't. God does not fail. God does not die. God does not abandon us, ever!

As chapter 3 opens we are listening in to a conversation between two people: Nicodemus and Jesus. As the conversation progresses we realize that Jesus isn't just talking to Nicodemus; he's talking to us. This conversation ends with deeply encouraging words directed to all of us: "those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." The first readers of John's gospel were a group of people that had been cast out of their synagogues and likely shunned by their families. They were people set loose from the social networks that their culture traditionally provided. Jesus' words remind them that they are people who have seen "the truth," seen Jesus as God's son. They followed him because they recognized that he is the provider of "light." (They have come to the light....) And there is a hint of a promise that they will be proven "right." That the choices they have made, the conclusions that they have drawn, and the actions they have taken as a result of those conclusions have occurred because of the Spirit of God leading them on. Yes, the gospel writer is saying, "Yes, Jesus is the Son of God. Yes, Jesus is your salvation!"

The gospel of John is not always easy. We are witness to that when we observe Nicodemus try to figure out what Jesus is saying in the reading for today. Baptism, the Spirit blowing where it will and

doing whatever it wants, foretelling that salvation will come from someone (Jesus) who is lifted up, and finally reminding us that Jesus was sent to demonstrate God's great love for the world. All of this is packed into this passage. So yes, the gospel of John is not easy. Some say that it has so many nuances that it is worth a lifetime of study. Others say that they learn something new every time they start reading a passage from it.

Whatever the case, through this passage we are witnesses to important teachings from Jesus. This passage teaches us why he was sent to earth. It reminds us that the key to salvation is to look to the cross or to be more specific, the one hanging on the cross. Amen.