

**John 3:1-17**

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> 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.” <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus 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?” <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You<sup>[d]</sup> must be born from above.’<sup>[e]</sup> <sup>8</sup> The wind<sup>[f]</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup> “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you<sup>[g]</sup> do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.<sup>[h]</sup> <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.<sup>[i]</sup>

<sup>16</sup> “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.

<sup>17</sup> “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.

The first time I read through today’s Gospel reading, I got to verse 16 and it stopped me in my tracks. “God so loved the world.” One of those super-famous, super-quotable verses stuck right in the middle of this perplexing nighttime exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus. Did you feel that way, too, when I read the text? Even if you’re not a person who can quote Bible verses left and right, I bet you could finish the rest of John 3:16 when I say, “For God so loved the world...” I typed John 3:16 into an Amazon search and here’s a little sampling of the John 3:16 merchandise I found: a t-shirt for teen girls, a baseball cap, a cigar box, a decorative

throw pillow, a coffee mug, a necktie, a baby onesie, a wall clock, a pop socket (ask a young person what that is if you don't know), a watch, a wall poster...I could go on. Football player Tim Tebow famously wore the verse on his face in eye black during that 2009 football game. The popular Western fast food chain In-N-Out Burger has John 3:16 printed in small type on the bottom of their soda cups. Country singer Keith Urban wrote a song that goes, "I learned everything I needed to know from John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16."

I'm going to stop now, but just know I could keep going. There's a reason this verse is so popular; just listen to it again. "For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." There's not a single verse of Scripture that can sum up the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, but for many Christians in recent decades, this verse feels like it comes pretty close. And if you add it together with the verse that comes right after it, it's even better: "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." If ever you needed a couple of verses to memorize to help remind you of what it means to be a people saved by Christ, these are pretty good. It's not hard to understand why John 3:16 is such a hit in the Christian-screen-printed-merchandise world.

And it's also not hard to understand why I was so surprised when I remembered that this verse actually comes right in the middle of a story. Tim Tebow and Keith Urban and the folks at In-N-Out Burger might love to quote and reference this single Bible verse, but it's the task of the Church, of this gathered community, to dig a little deeper than folks can do on the football field or in a country song or in a burger joint. This comes from a story about what it means to be born of the Spirit, to let the Spirit birth something new within us and mother us into a new way of living.

All of our sermons here at FPC during this season of Lent are dealing with stories that happen at nighttime. There's just something about the nighttime and the darkness that resonates with this wilderness season of Lent. This is the season where we dwell with Jesus and his disciples as he sets his face towards Jerusalem, where we come face-to-face with our own mortality in the ashes on our own foreheads, where we commit more deeply to the life of Christian discipleship. These nighttime stories feel right for this season; daylight comes on Easter morning, but in the meantime, we remember all the growth that happens in the nighttime, when we sleep and when we watch and keep vigil.

Nicodemus seems to know something of this because he doesn't come to Jesus in the light of day. He comes to Jesus by night. And it makes sense on another level, too: Nicodemus is no regular guy with some questions for this curious new man in town. Nicodemus is a part of the religious establishment, a member of the community of religious folks for whom Jesus was a real nuisance, even a threat, with his healing and teaching and miracle-working. And Nicodemus isn't just part of this religious establishment, he's a leader in it. And so, he comes to Jesus by night, careful but clearly very curious. "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. No one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Nicodemus is so curious here; do you hear it? He's there in the dark of night with this man who is stirring things up within Nicodemus's own community, and while he's not willing to bring his thoughts to Jesus in the broad daylight, he's bringing his curiosity and laying it all out on the table. He's heard things and seen things, and people are starting to get suspicious. Nicodemus comes right to the source, in the cover of the nighttime darkness.

And in that darkness, Jesus teaches Nicodemus something about the Spirit. Jesus says that to really see the kingdom of God, to really get an answer to the curiosities that Nicodemus is bringing, he has to be born from above. Born of the Spirit. Nicodemus doesn't get it

immediately; in fact, Jesus is doing a little Greek wordplay here, and Nicodemus doesn't even hear the right meaning of some of the words Jesus is saying: How can a person be born *again*? Can a person really go back inside their mother's womb and be born a second time? The gospel writer doesn't give us any stage directions here, but we can fill them in. Nicodemus is scratching his head, cocking his head up towards the canopy of stars. Jesus is shaking his head, maybe rolling his eyes a little bit.

"No, Nicodemus. Try again, and maybe be a little less literal this time. You can't enter the kingdom of God without being born from above, without being born of water and Spirit. And don't look so confused, man, just listen: the wind blows wherever it blows, and you hear it but you can't see where it's coming from or where it's headed. This is what it's like to be born from above, to be born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus still doesn't seem to get it, so Jesus puts things a little more concretely; Jesus tells him a little something else about how to see the kingdom of God. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but 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." Jesus is saying: this is who God is, Nicodemus. God desires salvation, not condemnation. And if we want to *truly* be part of this story of salvation, we have to be born of the Spirit. And then Jesus doesn't say any more about that business of being born of the Spirit but we can fill in the blanks. If we want to be born of the Spirit, we have to pay attention to where the Spirit is moving, where the Spirit is birthing new things in the world, because the Spirit moves like wind and if we're not paying attention, we might miss it.

There's a Presbyterian pastor and writer named John Buchanan who tells a story about a baptism he performed once in his congregation. The child was two years old, a bit older than

a lot of baptisms in our tradition, and he hoisted the child up onto his hip and said the words we always say: “You are a child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever.” The child was silent for a moment, and then yelled out, “UH-OH!” Buchanan says that this was the most perfectly appropriate response any of us could have to the promises of baptism – Uh oh! This is serious business! We’re not messing around anymore! What does this mean? We might imagine that after Jesus’s monologue in today’s story, Nicodemus could respond similarly: Uh-oh. God desires salvation, not condemnation, and we have to be born of the Spirit? Uh-oh.

Uh-oh, indeed. Jesus says we have to be born from above, born of the Spirit, and this is what the Spirit is like: the wind blows wherever it wants to blow, and you can hear it but you don’t know where it’s coming from or where it’s headed. This is the Spirit that will birth you, this is the Spirit that will mother you forth into a new way of being in the world. This is a wild Spirit, a Spirit that will not be tamed. This is a Spirit that moves sometimes with the whimsy of a gentle morning breeze, a Spirit that moves sometimes with the force of a hurricane gale. This is a Spirit whose origins you may not see, and whose destination is unknown. And if you want to see the kingdom of God, if you want to be part of this grand story of God’s salvation, you have to let yourself be mothered, be birthed, by that same Spirit.

Of course, this is not a one-time rebirth from above, but a perpetual turning away from the powers of condemnation and towards the grace of salvation. It requires that we be perpetually attuned to the winds of the Spirit in our lives and in our neighborhoods, so that we might be birthed into a new way of life by that same Spirit. This sounds like an abstract way of learning what it means to witness to the kingdom of God, and in a way, it is. The gospel of John is full of these abstractions: in the beginning was the Word; worship in spirit and truth; I am the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life. But this

business of being born of the Spirit, of being mothered by the winds of the Spirit into a new way of living, this does not have to be abstract and mysterious. We just have to ask good questions.

Where did you see the Spirit moving in your own life in the past week? You might not have noticed it in the moment, but with some reflection, where was the Spirit alive in your life, and what might that moment be mothering you towards? The late poet Mary Oliver offered these words of instruction for living well: pay attention, be astonished, and tell about it. Where can you pay attention and allow yourself room to be astonished? And then who can you tell? The Spirit blows like the wind, which means we get to pay attention in even the most unlikely of places. In the carpool line picking up the kids – where is the Spirit moving? Do you notice that one teacher who always gives a high-5 or words of affirmation to every kid who's leaving school? Tell somebody about it! Send that teacher an appreciation email, or tell your kids to pay attention to how he is showing grace and love to his students. At the office on a slow Tuesday afternoon – where is the Spirit moving? Do you notice that one person at the office who doesn't receive a lot of attention but whose work is always solid and whose input is always insightful? Tell somebody about it! If you're in a position of power and if it's appropriate, call it out publicly, or write her a private note of gratitude.

Of course, the Spirit moves in community, too. Noticing the winds of community Spirit-movement might take a little more practice and a little more attention. Where is the Spirit moving in the community around you? Not just in your own neighborhood, but what about the neighborhoods you don't often drive through, or the places in town you don't usually visit? You can start close to home, too. Next time you're driving or walking to church, slow down a bit and look across Green Street to see what the Spirit is doing here in Fisher Park. At Faith Action International House, that little white house next to our garden, folks are partnering with

immigrant families to make sure newcomers to this community are well cared-for. There are diaper drives, and Identification Card systems, and free transportation networks to medical appointments. Next door to Faith Action, the Step Up organization is partnering with folks looking for stable work and job skills. Go look on their website when you get home and read about some of the amazing stories of what the Spirit is doing through partnerships in that organization. A few doors down from Step Up, the folks at NCCJ are working to break down barriers of bias and racism. Stop by sometime and I bet someone would be excited to tell you more about how the winds of the Spirit are moving to transform the struggles of the Greensboro community. And then when you learn more about what the Spirit is already doing in the neighborhood, testify to the power of the Spirit! Your testimony doesn't have to be an impassioned speech in front of a crowd – it can be a conversation with your family or friend group about what's going on in the neighborhood. And then you can jump in and do something. This is what it looks like to be born of the Spirit, to be mothered forth by the winds of the Spirit day after day.

So, we return to my Amazon search of John 3:16 merchandise. Next time you see a screen-printed tote bag or a license plate holder or a t shirt with that verse on it, I hope it reminds you to be born of the Spirit. I hope it reminds you to pay attention to which way the winds of the Spirit are blowing in your life and community, and to do something about it. Because when we allow the Spirit's winds to mother us into a new way of living in the world, we get to witness more deeply to God's work of salvation, which blows like the wind in surprising directions. So pay attention, be astonished, and tell about it. Amen.