

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel
Preached on the Second Sunday in Lent, March 12, 2017

A Former Baptist Preaches on John 3:16

As a former Baptist, you know I would get a passage like John 3:16 to preach about. They go together like peanut butter and jelly. This is one of the most famous passages in the entire Bible. I could see this phrase on a lot of bumper stickers or embroidered on samplers — “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” This is the first verse I memorized, but it was so long ago that I don’t remember memorizing it.

It’s one of those things in religious life, like The Lord’s Prayer or “Jesus Loves Me,” our final hymn for the service. The same goes for John 3:16. I know it so well that it goes way back. “In the Garden” is also a beloved chestnut of a hymn that all my residents at the home know it, and I sing it with them every week.

There’s part of me that doesn’t love “In the Garden,” but another part of me knows that, should I develop dementia or some sort of disease that’s going to rob me of my memory, I will be able to sing that hymn for the rest of my life. It’s just like saying The Lord’s Prayer or the Twenty-Third Psalm or John 3:16.

Memorizing, learning by rote, is a kind of learning that has been left by the wayside on the thought that it’s not a great method of education. But really, I think it is important to know certain poems, certain Bible passages, certain songs or hymns. It’s good for us to memorize such things because we

might come to a time when our memory will go or we won’t be able to see the page, but we’ll still be able to say or sing really beloved words. They sink in when we memorize them. They become part of us. They become part of our soul. And John 3:16 is part of my soul.

John 3:17, a Wonderful Follow-up to 3:16

There’s another verse that immediately follows John 3:16 and is almost never read: “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.” I think that’s a fascinating follow-up to John 3:16. God did not want to condemn the world at all. Indeed, God loved the world.

Remember John 3:17 as we get more into this passage, which presents a really strange little meeting. As John often has written in his gospel, he has people meeting Jesus, and they have these strange conversations. Jesus is speaking in one way, very spiritually and symbolically. Most people are usually very literal on the surface of things, so they never quite understand Jesus. It happens over and over again, especially in John.

And here in the beginning of John 3, we have Nicodemus. Who was Nicodemus? We’re told that he was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jewish people. He was a member of what was called the Sanhedrin, the Jewish body of leaders who ran the temple and religious life, and we know the rest of the story of Lent that Jesus was going to go before the

Sanhedrin. And so normally, the response when you find out that somebody is a Pharisee was to go “boo, hiss.”

But in this case, Nicodemus was seeking Jesus out. He wanted to talk with Jesus. But of course, he goes at night, doesn't he? Why did he do that? His fellow Pharisees wouldn't know he was doing this. Where were Jesus and Nicodemus for this meeting? The previous passage in John has Jesus cleansing the temple in Jerusalem (John 2:13), and that is different from the other gospels. You will notice I read from Chapter 3 of the NRSV.

The Temple Had Its Own Money

The chronology in John is different. He has Jesus go to Jerusalem a couple of times, but the other three gospels have Jesus heading to Jerusalem throughout the whole ministry, and then at the end, he goes into Jerusalem. Thereupon come in quick succession the triumphal entry, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. John has Jesus constantly going to Jerusalem, and he has just cleansed the temple and turned over the tables, which doesn't win him a lot of friends in the temple.

The temple had its own Jewish money because Roman money bore an image of the emperor on it, and therefore, Jewish people thought that was extremely idolatrous. So when they went into the temple and wanted to buy an animal to be sacrificed, they had to use temple money. They had to take their Roman “dirty” money, change it with the money-changers, and then use their temple money in order to buy a dove or a pigeon or an ox or whatever, and then arrange to have it sacrificed.

Jesus sees all this buying and selling and some cheating, and he gets mad and turns

the tables over. So he's not on the good list of the Sanhedrin.

Nicodemus Goes “Huh”; Mistakes Jesus

But Nicodemus wants to visit Jesus. He comes at night and other people don't know about it, and the two have a rather strange conversation. Nicodemus is very laudatory at first. Rabbi, he calls Jesus (John 3:2), “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God,” and he gives Jesus a really nice opening, and says further that “For no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” And Jesus answers him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

And Nicodemus has just given Jesus a nice compliment and Jesus says, “One has to be born anew,” or again, or from above. Despite the popularity and beauty of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son” where a great many churches and people have placed their intense focus from Chapter 3 is oddly enough on the line that Jesus just said to Nicodemus, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

The word is “anōthen” in Greek. “Born again.” “Born anew.” Usually translated as “born again,” and I know you've heard of that. Lots of churches, especially evangelical ones, have picked up that phrase around the beginning of the last century and really did run with it. That became the most important passage in almost all the Bible. You have to be “born again.”

From Baptist Kid to Presbyterian Pastor

The church of my youth was Baptist, and I have admitted this many times. My parents

moved to Scotch Plains, New Jersey. My mother was Presbyterian, but she didn't like the Presbyterian church in town. She liked the Baptists because they were much friendlier, and so my brother and I were raised in the Baptist church. We were baptized there, the whole bit. And of course, John 3:16 was important, but even more important was being born again.

I never actually figured out the date and time that I was indeed born again. Even so, I was pretty sure I wasn't born again. That is, I wasn't certain, but I knew how the term was used. Maybe you've heard of this too, and perhaps some people have asked if you were born again, but I've been asked many times over and over again.

Even when I was getting ready to be a Presbyterian minister, I had to meet with a committee called the Preparation for Ministry, and it was in the West Jersey Presbytery. West Jersey included Cape May, where I was living at the time. Meeting with my committee wasn't a lot of fun, I can tell you. In part, I was asked by one particular minister, "Janet, when were you born again?" I thought to myself, "Jeez, I didn't think I was going to hear this stuff from a Presbyterian."

But I did hear the dreaded question, and I was afraid that he might want to hear a date. "Oh, you're right, April 3rd, 1973." How I wished I could have said that, even in my youth, because a lot of people I knew had the date and the time fixed at 8:10 a.m., the date, the time, the circumstance when I accepted Jesus Christ into my heart as Lord and Savior. That's how the verse is understood. "Very truly, I tell you." And it's used as a cudgel to beat you over the head with if you don't have a specific answer, really.

How Did That Happen?

In evangelical churches, this has become a centerpiece of their theology. The Methodists picked it up too, and they call it "justification." You have to be justified by your personal relationship with Christ, but you have to have that date and that time. You have to be born again. And if you're not born again, you're not saved. Salvation equals seeing the kingdom of God.

And that's what Jesus actually said in Verse 3, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God, without being born from above." So you have to ask yourself, "How did that happen? How did that verse become equated with the date and time when you accepted Christ?"

What did Jesus mean by salvation? In church we've been discussing quite a bit that big term of salvation and what it might mean, and the fact that it means different things to different people. It has many meanings, just like the many roads to Nirvana. Salvation has many levels of meaning, just like the passage in John, there are many levels.

Still Discussing It, Centuries Later

And when Jesus said, "You have to be born from above," what did he really mean by that? We're still discussing it, centuries later. You have to be born from above or born anew. You have to have a spiritual rebirth or an understanding that we are indeed spiritual beings and need to attend to the spirit — all of that and more. It's big, and it means a lot of things, and once again, it means a lot of different things to a lot of different people.

What does it mean to be a spiritual being having a physical experience? We've said

that from this pulpit many times. Somehow that got equated with being a miserable sinner and thinking you need a savior, and it's Jesus. That statement was made by me on April 3rd, 1973. And really, even though it's printed on bumper stickers and embroidered on samplers, John 3:16 does get left out of the equation.

Born from above means being an absolute sinner, which means we have to be born again, which equals salvation, which equals Jesus. So what happened to the idea of "God so loved the world"? And the word is world, the cosmos, everything, everybody. Love gets left out, and love is the heart of the gospel. Not being born from above, not really. We're not even sure what Jesus really meant by that.

Nicodemus certainly didn't know. He thought Jesus meant a literal second birth. How can you do that? You can't leave your mother's womb a second time. Obviously, Nicodemus is on the physical level, and Jesus is at the spiritual level. Love is the heart of the gospel. God acts in Jesus out of love. And that really is the heart of the matter. For what is the kingdom of God, really? Another phrase means a lot, and has many definitions, doesn't it? The kingdom of God, not carefully but getting here, in our hearts and in our lives, around us, amid us. We're going to go there. It has many, many meanings, like salvation.

Not Cows or Aliens or Physics

Last week, I wasn't here, and I want to thank you for a wonderful time away. I drove to Florida for the first time and drove back. I sat in sunshine among the palm trees and had a wonderful time with Lee and Dave. They both say, "Hi" to you all.

And then last weekend I got to attend Northminster Presbyterian Church, a church I served as an associate for a time with the Reverend Dr. Barry Downing and his wife Ellie. We all served together there. And Barry, as of March 5th last week, has been ordained for 50 years. It's a great accomplishment. Barry said to me many times when I worked with him, "Welcome to this ministry." So I say that again to you, Barry, "Welcome to this ministry." It was a true celebration at Northminster. His sons were there with much of his family, and we had a special lunch after the service.

Many years ago now, I was going to be interviewed by Northminster, and one of the first things you do when you're going to get interviewed is to talk with the Executive Presbyter who was in charge of the Presbytery at that time. People in that position function like a bishop, but we don't use that term in Presbyterian circles. It means overseer.

The Executive Presbyter's Favorite Book

In my case, the Executive Presbyter was the Reverend Dr. Barbara Renton, a great woman. We had a phone conversation about Northminster, and so she said to me in all seriousness — we had a little chat about my background — and then she said, "Janet, have you read the book?" And I thought to myself, "She's asking me about the Bible." And I said, "Of course I have." Thinking to myself, "I felt guilty." I thought, well okay, I skimmed Malachi. One day, I'll read Habakkuk and First, Second, and Third John.

Let's be honest, right? Who's read Habakkuk in this sanctuary? Maybe you have, but I don't remember a thing about what it says. So I said, "Of course I read the Bible." And she said, "No, no. That's not the book I

meant. I meant *The Bible and Flying Saucers*. And I said, "I've never heard of that book." And she said, well, if you go to Northminster, your senior pastor wrote that book." And I said, "He did? Fascinating. I will have to get the book." And I did, and I have read most of it, Barry. This brings up a chapter I have to get to.

Barry and I know each other well, and you know, we might not be together in some things, but I do believe there's life out there. We have discussed this many times. The universe is far too large and varied and beautiful not to have life on other planets, some of which I deeply believe are much more advanced than we are, and some of which are not, amoebas and so forth.

Love Is the Heart of His Ministry

And I want to say to you how great working with Barry was. He did teach me quite a bit, and not about cows, necessarily. I like cows from a distance. I like to see them in fields, but I know they're big and very heavy and

dirty when you get up close. And aliens, and I love science fiction. And physics, I try to read books on physics, but I just can't get my mind around it.

And they've all played a part in Barry's ministry. So have Bible study and Presbyterian leadership and worship services and funerals and weddings and confirmation class. They've all been a part of Barry's ministry over these many years.

But the heart of Barry's ministry is love, pure and simple — and sometimes not so simple at all. Love is the true heart of your ministry, Barry, and that is what you taught me, and for that I'm deeply grateful.

Love Is the Heart of the Gospel

For God so loved the world. That's my take-away from this passage and really what Lent is all about. It's why we're here this morning. It's why we serve, and study, and have fellowship together. Love is the heart of the gospel, the good news. Thanks be to God.

Amen.