

I've heard that verse called "the gospel in a nutshell," and that's not a bad description, but here's the problem with something you can put in a nutshell: you can leave it there. You can carry it around in your pocket like a good luck charm and never take it out and crack it open and have a second look. That's what I want us to do today: I want us to have a second look at John 3:16, and by the end of the message we may have to give up our old childhood understanding of that verse. We may have to turn toward a new mind.

That's how this chapter begins. A Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, comes to Jesus by night saying, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." And Jesus says, "You've got to change your mind, Nicodemus." What?

"I said, you've got to change your mind. You Pharisees think you've got it all figured out. You think you know what makes a person right with God. You think it comes from keeping the Law of Moses and separating yourselves from anything unclean, but I say you've got to start all over again from the beginning; you've got to be born again." And Nicodemus says, **What?**

"Can a man enter into his mother's womb a second time and be born?" "No," Jesus says. "You're thinking of physical birth. I'm talking about spiritual birth. I'm talking about being washed in the waters of baptism, I'm talking about being baptized in the Holy Spirit. That's how an old, sorry sinner like you becomes a new creation. That's how someone who's been born once gets born again." And that's when Nicodemus more or less disappears from the scene as Jesus turns toward the future, explaining to the people of John's time and our time how to be saved.

He says, “Remember when God’s people were in the wilderness and poisonous snakes came into the camp and started biting them? Remember how Moses made a snake out of bronze and lifted it up on a pole so that anyone who was bitten could look at that snake and live? That’s a good analogy for what’s going to happen to me. I’m going to be lifted up—on a cross!—and anyone who looks at me through the eyes of faith will live forever.

Somebody write this down:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth [New King James Translation] in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” And that’s the verse we have remembered, isn’t it? Out of this entire chapter that’s the verse we have stuffed into a nutshell and carried around in our pockets.

Because it is such good news, and because it is so simple. If I asked a stranger on the street what John 3:16 is all about she would probably be able to tell me. She would say, “It’s all about believing in Jesus so that when you die you can go to heaven instead of hell.” And she might add, “If you’ve got that, what else do you really need? Why bother reading the rest of the Bible, why bother going to church, why bother loving your neighbor if you’ve already got the Golden Ticket, and got it in your pocket?” And that’s when I would want to say, “Oh, honey! You’ve got to be born again!” Because I don’t think John 3:16 was ever meant to be a Golden Ticket to get you into heaven. I think it was meant to be Good News, and the Good News of the gospel is so much bigger than what happens to us after we die. So, let’s have a second look; let’s turn toward a new mind where John 3:16 is concerned.

First of all, it says “For God so loved the world,” and let’s pause right there for a moment. You know that the Gospel of John was written in Greek, right? And the Greek word for “love” that is used in this verse is exactly the one you would expect. It’s agape,

the selfless, sacrificial love for which God is best known. God loved the world like that, John says: selflessly, sacrificially. The real surprise in this phrase is the word that is used for “world.” It’s **kosmos**, the same word John uses in other places to mean the sinful world. In 1 John 2:15, for example, where he says, “Love not the world,” it’s actually “love not the kosmos, or the things of the kosmos,” things like the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches. Those are the things the people of this world seem to love, yet they are nevertheless the people God loves. So you could read the first part of John 3:16 like this: “For God so loved the sinful sinners of this sinful world that he gave his only begotten son.”

Let’s talk about that phrase for a moment. God **gave** his son. He didn’t send him; he gave him. And if you look at the other ways that verb is used in the New Testament you will see that he gave his Son to the world as you would give a gift. It’s a perfect verse for the Season of Christmas. God gave his Son to the world like a Christmas **present**. He didn’t do it because he had to, he did it because he wanted to, for the same reasons you give gifts to people you love. God loved the world so much he gave it the best Christmas present ever, and the most valuable one. He gave his “only begotten” Son.

What does that mean?

It means that while all of us are, in some sense, the children of God, Jesus was, in a very special sense, the Son of God. The biblical writers used a number of different terms to describe Jesus’s special nature. They spoke of him as the **beloved** son, as the **only** son, and in the beautiful language of the King James Version, the **only begotten** son, which seems to mean that he was not created as God created other things, and not fathered in the way humans reproduce, but begotten. The early church wanted to be sure that no one was confused about this, and in the words of the Nicene Creed attempted to

spell it out. Listen:

**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.**

If that doesn't answer all your questions you are not alone, but maybe it helps you understand that from the very beginning the church has thought of Jesus as different and special from all the other children of God. And the idea that God would give a Son like that to a world like this tells you something about him, too, doesn't it? Why did he do it?

“That whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” The thing that strikes me about that phrase right away is the idea that God doesn't want anyone to perish. I think we sometimes walk around with the idea that God is simply looking for a good excuse to send us all to hell. This phrase tells me the opposite is true. Not only does it not say anything about hell, but it says that **God is offering us a way to escape our own destruction**. That's what the Greek verb means literally, and it carries with it the idea of “perishing, being lost, ruined, or destroyed.” **Have you ever known someone like that, someone who seemed to be on the road to ruin, and maybe as a result of their own bad choices?**

God doesn't want that to happen to anyone, and so offers this generous alternative: “Turn around. Stop staggering down the road to ruin. Believe in my only begotten Son and begin your everlasting life.” But the word in Greek isn't everlasting, it's not

even eternal, it's something much better than that. Everlasting life is life that doesn't end, and you and I both know people who wouldn't want the life they are living to go on forever. If I said to the man on life support in the Intensive Care Unit, "Good news! This is never going to end! You're going to be here on life support forever!" he would ask me to pull the plug. We've been taught to think of everlasting life in terms of quantity, but **quantity without quality is not something any of us would want.**

Eternal life sounds better than that. It seems to suggest a different kind of quality. But the phrase in Greek is better still. It's **zoen aionion**, which means, literally, "life of the ages." It suggests the kind of abundant life Jesus came to give, and if you had life like that you would want it to last forever.

So, how do you get it? Apparently by believing in Jesus, and this is where it gets tricky. What does that mean, to believe in Jesus? Some people seem to think it means believing things about Jesus, and so they put a lot of emphasis on believing that he is the only begotten Son of God, that he was born of a virgin, that he was raised, physically, from the dead, and that he is coming again someday. But that's not really what this verse says. It doesn't say, "Whosoever believeth things about Jesus will not perish," it says, "Whosoever **believeth in him.**" What does that mean, to believe in someone, and how is it different from believing things about them?

You may have some ideas from your own experience, but in a book called *The Heart of Christianity* Marcus Borg wrote, "Prior to the seventeenth century the word 'believe' did not mean believing in the truth of statements or propositions. Grammatically, the object of believing was not statements, but a person. Moreover, the contexts in which it was used in premodern English make it clear what it meant: to hold

dear, to prize, to give one's loyalty to, to give oneself, to commit oneself. Most simply 'to believe 'meant **'to love.** 'Indeed the English words 'believe 'and 'belove 'are related.

What we believe is what we belove. Faith is about loving God."

I might add that the Christian faith is about loving the God revealed in Jesus. It's about believing in him, and not only believing things about him. Now, here's the interesting thing about love: when you are in it, as in, "I just fell in love with someone," you are living the life of the ages. I saw this on a YouTube video not long ago. A doctor was explaining how the chemicals released by the brain when you are in love make everything better. You can be plodding along day after day at a job you hate, working the drive-through window at a fast food restaurant, when the new girl shows up for work. And she's gorgeous. And you start talking to her and she starts talking to you and one day you say, "Would you ever want to go out with me?" and she says, "I thought you'd never ask." In that moment this flood of chemicals is released, and suddenly your job isn't so terrible anymore, food tastes better and music sounds sweeter. What happened? You fell in love! And in that moment you think, "This is what life is supposed to feel like. This is the life of the ages!"

Is it possible to belove Jesus like that? Maybe it is! Maybe we've just never tried it before. Suppose that instead of checking off a long list of things we believe about Jesus God wants us to leap into the ocean of his love and know the **joy of being loved** in return? And suppose the life of the ages begins not out there somewhere, in the future, when we die, but on the very day we take the plunge? Some of what Jesus says next seems to support this. In John 3:17 (a verse I love almost as much as 3:16) he says, "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." Where did we get the idea that God is just waiting for a good excuse to send us to hell?

Listen to verse 18: “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” Do you hear what Jesus is saying? Judgment Day is not out there somewhere, it’s here! It has already come! He spells it out in **verse 19: “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”**

I know. This can get a little confusing. We were talking about life and then we were talking about love and now here we are talking about light. But if you take **light, life, and love** and stir them together you end up with this wonderful substance called “God.” And Jesus is made of that same substance. Listen to what he says in verse 20: “For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.” And then in verse 21, the last verse of today’s reading, “But 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.”

It’s a lot to take in. A sermon isn’t nearly enough time. But if you can, do this: take that nutshell out of your pocket and crack it open and begin to appreciate the breadth and length and height and depth of John 3:16. I think you will find that it is so much more than a Golden Ticket to get you into heaven. It is an invitation to begin living the life of the ages here and now, a life that is abundant, overflowing, and everlasting. Thanks be to God. And the church said, AMEN.

This was my sermon three years ago so I probably will relate some from it. One never knows what’s going to come out by the time I deliver a sermon and maybe even relate to the world happenings this week. KatieD+