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John 2: 23-25, 3: 1-21

Sermon Title: Come to the Light

John 2:23-25

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

23 When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. 24 But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people 25 and needed no one to testify about anyone, for he himself knew what was in everyone.

John 3:1-21

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Nicodemus Visits Jesus

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

11 “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 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.

16 “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.

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. 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. 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. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 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.” (This Is the Word of the Lord)

Please pray with me...

Introduction:

This morning we are exploring one of the more mysterious stories in Scripture. Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, meet Jesus at night. They have a private conversation about being born of the Spirit. Nicodemus is confused by Jesus’ words. Jesus like a good rabbi wanting to awaken curiosity does not resolve the questions Nicodemus has about faith. Instead, he explains that the movement of the Spirit is like the wind blowing wherever it wills.

Nicodemus is left in a curious place. He is a fellow religious teacher like Jesus and yet Jesus mesmerizes him with his wisdom. What does it mean to be born again? Jesus feels the answer is a spiritual truth in some ways beyond the knowledge of Nicodemus. But no doubt Jesus is pleased that Nicodemus is open to learn more.

Later in John chapter 3 verse 16, we read what is probably the most famous Scripture in the whole Bible. “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.”

If you are like me, this was one of the first Scriptures you ever memorized. I was taught that this Scripture was the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news was that God loved the world and sent his Son to die on a cross and rise from the dead, so that those who believe in Jesus would go to heaven when we die.”

I still feel positive feelings about this verse from my youth. Because I am a Sports fan, I also associate this verse with signs usually at sporting events that highlight John 3:16. One interesting story from Sports comes from Pro football. It involved the Denver Broncos quarterback at the time, Tim Tebow. Tim Tebow was known for being a vocal Christian during his time in the NFL. He had a spectacular game in the playoff during his first year in the NFL called the 3:16 game. Here is a written description of what happened in that game...

“The 3:16 game was a National Football League playoff game between the Denver Broncos and the Pittsburgh Steelers on January 8, 2012. The game took place in the 2011–12 NFL playoffs and finished with five statistics that each contained three digits in the order 3–1–6. It was the first playoff game to go to overtime since a 2010 overtime rule was codified stating both teams could possess the ball unless one scored a touchdown. The game also set a record for the shortest overtime in NFL history at the time; the Broncos scored a touchdown 11 seconds into overtime on their first play.

When Tim Tebow played college football for the Florida Gators during the 2008 Florida Gators season, he began writing messages on his eye black. At the conclusion of the season, Tebow played in the 2009 BCS National Championship Game and inscribed the biblical citation "John 3:16" on his eye black. Exactly three years to the day after that championship game, Tebow played in this playoff game as a quarterback for the Broncos on January 8, 2012.

During the game, Tebow accumulated 316 passing yards with an average of 31.6 yards per completion. The Steelers finished the game with a time of possession of 31 minutes and 6 seconds. The game's ratings peaked between 8:00 and 8:15 p.m. Eastern Time with a rating of 31.6. Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger threw a second-quarter interception on 3rd-and-16.”

So that is the story of the 3:16 game and I personally think in some mysterious way God used that game and the surprising season of Tim Tebow as a testimony to God's desire to reveal himself through Jesus. You may wonder if the 3:16 was a coincidence, but I personally think God was up to something.

Of course, as we explore our text today that includes the message of John 3:16, we are faced with a profound message of what John's Gospel teaches us about the purpose of Jesus' life. Let me highlight a few truths about the Gospel that come from our story today.

1. God loves the world. God loves the entire cosmos. This may seem like a given since we talk about this truth all the time at our church. But I hope we can pause and really take that in. God loves the world. God loves you. God loves me. This is the most important thing to believe about God. God is loving.
2. God's love is shown in sending Jesus.
3. Belief in him leads to eternal life.
4. The following verse gives us also important news. Jesus did not come to condemn the world but to save it.

I think this is important to remember. Many people wonder if God is really loving. Some people imagine that God is an angry presence in the world condemning bad behavior with a spirit of judgement. Instead, our passage suggests that God is loving. So loving God became one of us in his son Jesus to show love to the world rather than condemnation.

The last part of our passage is quite profound about the human condition. Although God loves humanity and offers us salvation and eternal life, we tend to choose at times to love the darkness more than the light. When we come to the light and let God's love offer us forgiveness of sin and healing, we find salvation, but when people choose to do evil things and stay in the dark, they do not find healing and wholeness. Instead, they experience a lostness that is a form of self-condemnation or judgement. Those who come to the truth of God's love find grace and healing in the light of God's love, but those who choose the way of darkness and evil do not find freedom or wholeness.

One of the major takeaways from this story today is that Jesus came to the world to show God's love and Jesus came so that we may come to the light.

How do you feel about coming to the light of Jesus in your life?

Do you ever prefer to stay in the darkness of sin or hate?

What does it mean to come to the light in your life?

In our world, Jesus also wants us to come to the light.

Yesterday, we took time to celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our nation, the United States of America.

For many this was a time to express gratitude for this nation and its ideals of democracy and the American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In my own life, I recognize that the United States has been a fairly positive place for my own pursuit of my dreams. I have received a good education. I have been able to pursue a meaningful vocation, and I have raised my family, while being able to worship my God in freedom. I am grateful for what the United States has offered me personally.

I also recognize as a historian and a faithful citizen of this country that we need to come into the light. We need to have Jesus shine his light of truth on our country. We need to face the reality that our tendency in this nation, like many other nations, is to put more trust in military might than peace talks. We tend to want to hide our history of oppression of Native peoples and our history of racism. I am glad that on Juneteenth, we are starting to become more aware of the way in which our country has struggled to fully understand the struggle of slavery and the long journey of black and brown people to experience full participation in society. As we come into the light in this country, we must still work for greater equality of genders and kindness to all people. We need to celebrate immigrants and people of all faiths.

Coming into the light is an ongoing journey. It is good to find things to be grateful about our nation, but we must never think of ourselves as superior to other nations. Any blessings we have as a country are so that we may bless other nations, which is why as followers of Jesus we must hold our nation accountable to the values of Jesus.

For the record, this is a non-partisan sermon. The light of Christ does not identify with one political party over another instead the light of Christ shines on every area of our lives, politics, social media, business and economics, culture and says that we are called to be people of love, compassion, and justice who seek to support the vulnerable and who never fall for the myth that one nation is to be viewed as above others. Like Christ, our nation must seek to serve the world if we are to be faithful to the Gospel.

Renowned theologian NT Wright reminds us that many Christians are unclear about the real nature of the Gospel. NT Wright explains...

“It will never do to suppose that Jesus came to teach people “how to get to heaven.” That view has been immensely popular in Western Christianity for many generations, but it simply won’t do. The whole point of Jesus’s public career was not to tell people that God was in heaven and that, at death, they could leave “earth” behind and go to be with him there. It was to tell them that God was now taking charge, right here on “earth”; that they should pray for this to happen; that they should recognize, in his own work, the signs that it was happening indeed; and that when he complete his work, it would become reality.”  
(Simply Jesus, P. 144-145)

What NT Wright is highlighting is that Jesus called us to bring God's kingdom down to earth. The Lord's Prayer says Thy Kingdom Come Thy Will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Friends, while we are on earth, we are called to live out the values of Christ, which are the values of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is about loving God, ourselves, our neighbors, and even our enemies.

As we remember our story today of Nicodemus, may we become curious about the purpose of why Jesus came to earth. May we let the wind of the Holy Spirit blow in our lives and call us to come to the light. May our nation also come to the light and be a vehicle in our world for peace, love, and compassion. May we humbly admit our failings as a nation, while seeking to amend our ways. May we be grateful for the good in our nation, while striving to do better in this world.

The good news of the Gospel is that Christ will accomplish the work of the kingdom of God in our world. The plan of God is to restore our world not to destroy it. The plan is for God's kingdom to come on earth through us and others who follow the teaching and truth of Jesus. We are called to partner with others of other faiths as well in efforts of love and compassion. What we must not do is let pride and arrogance keep us from coming into the light and allowing Christ to show us how to walk more fully in his kingdom values.

Where is Jesus calling you to come into the light? How might we go on this journey together and so more faithfully fulfill our mission to spread God's love to the world.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. Jesus did not come to condemn the world.

Friends let us come to the light.

AMEN