



John 3:1-17

***“God So Loved,  
That We Might Be Saved”***

*Sermon preached at  
Skyline Presbyterian Church  
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Today we celebrate the Trinity, but you might ask “Where is “Trinity” in our gospel scripture?” We read about God and Son, but where is Spirit? We were reminded of Spirit last week as we celebrated Pentecost, but Spirit is here this week too – look all around you. The reason that we are here today is because of Spirit. The words “...but have eternal life” are the words that tell us Spirit is here. Who else gives life except the Spirit? All the way back in the Garden when God created and breathed it was Spirit who gave life to the forms of clay, and all living creatures. God – three in One and One in three.

As I was preparing for today my thoughts turned to an incident that happened to me 30 years ago. I was living in Bethlehem. It was the summer of 1989. We had, along with our friends, lived through the hell of the first Intifada, or uprising, of the Palestinians and had witnessed and experienced the brutality of the Israeli army as they descended upon unarmed people to beat, injure and kill in the hope of driving out a people’s aspirations of justice, dignity and equality. In our student center as often happened the conversations would turn to God. During one of those conversations my best friend, whose name is Sobhe, which in Arabic means “the dawn,” asked me if I would take him into Jerusalem to visit the churches and tell him what they meant. He was very distraught and anxious because he and several members of his family had felt the effects of the brutality. Over the course of the next 2 or 3 days we did just that. We started on the Mount of Olives at the Church of the Ascension. On the last day we ended up in the Old City of Jerusalem at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. I took him all through the Basilica, explaining the significance of each place and finally we came into the great rotunda, in which sits the Chapel of the Tomb. Sobhe didn’t want to go inside so we just stood in front of it – gazing at it. My thoughts were racing as I was praying, “God, what can I say to him? What lasting words can I leave with him?” As clear as a bell, God spoke to me and said, “The Witness of the Church. The Witness of the Church.” In that moment I knew that there was nothing more to be said. That empty tomb is the greatest sermon that was ever preached and it’s because of that empty tomb that we can stand here today. I don’t know for how long we stood there, arm in arm, until he was ready to leave but I do know, that God’s word was spoken that day to my friend and God’s word does not return

void.

Let's look at this story to see what we can glean from it.

The first thing that we see is that Nicodemus came at night. That probably means that it is in the early evening because in Palestine, after a certain hour people just don't go out to drop in on someone. I also don't think that Nicodemus was necessarily coming to visit Jesus in a covert way. There's really nothing to suggest that in the story and in fact he may very well have been sent by the Sanhedrin to scope out this man and get a sense of what he was doing. Nicodemus would have been a good choice to send because he was sympathetic. So, we have a member of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee, a teacher of Israel. Considering the way that John relates this story it's very likely that John and some of the disciples were there and witnessed the whole exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Another thing that struck me about this story is that instead of Jesus making a declaration of what must happen to Nicodemus, it seems to me that Jesus is acknowledging something that has already happened in him and in the conversation, Jesus is not only trying to get Nicodemus to understand that but also to draw him in more deeply. Nicodemus states that "We know that you are a teacher come from God. No one can do the works that you do unless God is with him." Jesus then says that no one could know this unless he was born again. Has something already happened within Nicodemus that even Nicodemus didn't realize? Have you ever been in a conversation with someone who makes a statement about something and you respond with, "Yes, that's what I'm talking about. That's what I've been trying to tell you." That's what I think Jesus was doing here. He's telling Nicodemus what has happened to him, telling Nicodemus why he knows these things about Jesus. Nicodemus doesn't get it, so he questions how can one be born again?

To be born again. What is that? What does it mean? To me it's that moment of revelation and decision, when all that you have been taught and learned suddenly all begins to make sense. I was raised in the church and loved serving. I felt especially honored when I was old enough to participate as an acolyte, or altar boy. Taking communion was and still is a holy time for me. Being a lay leader, singing in the choir, being an usher...all these things had deep meaning for me. There came a time when I was 18, in the summer after my first year of college. I was alone in my bedroom, listening to some music and reading a small booklet that my sister had given me. Suddenly I felt the overwhelming weight of my sin bearing down on me. I began to weep like I had never done before, and I cried out to God. In a moment, I felt that weight lifted, and joy and peace like I had never known swept over me. My tears literally turned to laughter, and so much that I had been taught became real and I began to understand what it all meant. It was from that moment onward that I began to actively seek God's guidance and will for my life. It doesn't have to be that dramatic of a happening, but I do believe that this is something that every believer will experience at some point and it all becomes real and makes sense.

In response to Nicodemus' questions about a rebirth, Jesus again says something that I think is meant to draw him in more closely, not chide Nicodemus for not understanding. I think that Jesus is simply trying to help him understand what has happened to him. From our mothers we are born into this world, but it is from the Spirit that we are "born" into the Kingdom. "Flesh gives birth to flesh but Spirit gives birth to spirit." Then Jesus compares the born-again community to the wind blowing. You don't see it or know from where it comes but you feel it. So, it is with the Kingdom crowd. We come and go, from here to there, but we can't tell from where or to where, but the effects of our lives are evident. Look at the stories in the book of Acts. The disciples are all over the place, going from town to town, country to country. Phillip is literally taken from his meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch and dropped down in Caesarea. Think of all the ministries that have happened and still take place from this building. No one could have predicted them but look at the effects they have on peoples' lives not just in Tacoma, but in our country and in the world. I look at my own life and the circuitous path it has taken. I bet anyone here could do the same as you look back upon your life and see the signs of God's Spirit leading and guiding. Who among us knew long ago that we would end up together here?

It's Nicodemus' continued questions about how this can be that seems to get Jesus a little exasperated and He says to him, "You're one of Israel's teachers and you don't understand this?" The unasked question is "What have you been teaching?" Imagine going into your math or science class and the professor hasn't a clue about the subject and yet he's the teacher!

Now we come to the part of this verse that is the crux of the matter. In this verse, John 3:16, the apostle sums up the entire Gospel. In one sentence he gives the whole meaning for Jesus' life, death and resurrection. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." It all started with God and as we read on it all ends with God. God created this whole place that we call planet Earth. As the president of France said recently, "There is no planet B." This world was created by a loving and gracious God to give his Son a helpmeet. We were created to be in fellowship and deep relationship with God through this Son. Very quickly we turned on Him and chose a path of knowledge rather than one of Life, but God never stopped loving us. Look at all the ways he tried to do that. Read through the OT and see how He was constantly trying to show them the Son and to draw us back to him. One man was so intent upon following God that he was even willing to offer up his own son, to which God says, "No! That's not for you to do. Here's a lamb instead." God wants to make a covenant with this man and tells him to bring a cow, a goat, a ram, a dove and a pigeon. This is called "cutting a covenant." When two people wanted to make a vow one to the other, they would do just this, cut the carcasses of the animals in half and then walk between them. In this case, God puts him to sleep because this covenant that God is making, is one that a man is not able to keep so God will be the sole intermediary and thereby establishes the eternal covenant.

God did not forget his people. Down through the ages he kept sending preachers to them to tell them about a redeemer, a messiah who would come. As Paul says, "...in the dispensation of the fullness of time..." Jesus came. For God so loved the world. He loves the world in total and He loves the world individually. He loves you and me together and each one alone. Christ died to save sinners. This is the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages but was revealed in Jesus. It's the mystery explained by the empty tomb. God does not want anyone to perish. You might say, "I know he loves us, that is, those of us in here, members of this church, or even members of his universal church. I can even see how he loves the homeless person that I pass on the street but really, some people are pure evil. I think that there some folks where the line is drawn."

Again, as I was preparing for today another scene came to mind, one with which some of you may be familiar. It's from the book "The Shack" and the film that was recently made. The main character is Mack and there is one scene that has stayed with me. Mack has been taken to a cabin in the woods for his encounter with God. On a certain day he is told to go to a place where there is a cave and he's to go inside. When he does the cave closes and he is alone, and a person appears before him seated behind a judge's desk. They begin to debate about whether God is a good judge or not; and they speak about how Mack has judged others, even God, fairly or not. She asks him to judge from among his children and decide which ones are good enough to live and which ones must be sent to hell for eternity. He looks at her like she's nuts, and they debate the issue and she says, "surely two of them are good enough to live and the others must die." She starts listing all the faults of each child to show Mack just how bad each one really is. She finally brings him to the moment to judge them demanding that he choose two to live. Mack, his heart breaking, falls to his knees and as he sobs, begs her, "Take me. Take me instead of one of them. Let them live." She looks at him, her face filled with love and grace and says to Mack, "You sound like Jesus...You have judged well...You have judged them worthy of love." As the bible tells us, God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to eternal life.

This is the nature of God: Father, Son and Spirit. Father creates through the Son and they send the Spirit to give life abundantly. All who believe in the One that the Father sent have passed into eternal life. Those who do not believe are condemned because they have not believed in Jesus who God sent. As John goes on to say, the trial is over, and the verdict has been handed down: Light has come into the world. There's just problem: people love darkness rather than light. The first thing that Adam and Eve did was to hide and so that God would not see them and know that they had disobeyed His command.

We're no different. The biggest problem causing anxiety, depression, is knowing that we have done wrong. Whether or not we acknowledge that we have not obeyed God, there is something inherent in each one of us that causes guilt and shame. Whether or not we acknowledge it, that is Spirit. Because of our fallen state and our terribly broken world, we spend so much time fighting one another, whether it's wars or the gossip that develops when someone has knowingly or

unknowingly bruised our egos or slighted us in some way. We constantly make mountains out of molehills, just to be able to say that we are right and someone else is wrong. We take our broken relationship with God and break our relations with one another. How many families, friends, churches, people groups, even countries have divided in the name of being right? From there we go on to condemn people and judge them when we have no ground on which to stand. But God so loves us, so loved the world, that he gave his only son; and what was it that Jesus said from the cross? "Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."

I would challenge each of us, myself included, to begin to think of people in light of this verse. One of the big stumbling blocks for me in this area is the Israelis and the Palestinians. After experiencing on a small scale, the struggles, the dehumanization, the injustice that my friends and their families face daily and the continuing onslaught by an army against a defenseless people whose only goal is the eradication of these people from their own land; it is hard for me to think of this country named Israel in a very kind and gracious way. Then I am reminded of something that God spoke to me a long time ago; "Don't judge anyone before I'm ready to do so;" and then I'm reminded of this verse which says, "For God so loved the world..." No one is excluded. We all have difficult people in our lives: a co-worker who just bugs the heck out of you; a neighbor who constantly seems to do things just to irritate you; a family member that no one likes and who you all wish would just go away; maybe it's even a child or a brother or sister; maybe a parent; maybe it's someone on the opposite side of the political fence than you. We can look at our world we can think of Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Muamar Khadaffi, Stalin, Kruschev, think of our own presidents and political leaders. I would challenge us that whenever we think of any of these people, and especially when the thought of them begins to make your blood boil, overlay across the picture of that person these words, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..." And as Peter wrote in his second epistle, "But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. <sup>9</sup>The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

Father, Son and Spirit. Three in One and One in three. Perfect harmony; perfect relationship; perfect community. We were created in the image of God. Together, all of us were meant to be in perfect relationship and perfect community with God and with each other. Let us keep our minds fixed on Jesus and let him remind us to love one another; to be slow to anger but quick in mercy. Let Him remind us to work tirelessly to keep the bonds of fellowship. Let Father, Son and Spirit have perfect reign in our hearts and minds so that all who see us will know that we have been born again, and this has been done through God.

Amen.