

March 12, 2017
2nd Sunday in Lent
John 3:1-17

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

The Gospel lesson will be familiar to many of you. A Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus under cover of darkness and they get into a conversation about being born again. The passage includes a verse that possibly holds the record for Google hits thanks in part to Tim Tebo writing “John 3:16” on his face, but also because people are always holding it up on signs at football games and basketball games. We’ll read from the NIV this morning.

John 3:1-17 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." ³ In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." ⁴ "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." ⁹ "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not

accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven-- the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. *The Gospel of the Lord*

We're going to do something a little different today. We're going to have a conversation about what the phrase Born Again Christian means.

[Input from the congregation]

Born Again Christian has become a label for a stereotype that distorts the good news and makes it bad news. That relies on people's fears and guilt to scare them into faith. That may or may not be what people intend. I know it is not what Jimmy Carter intended when he said it in a TV interview when he was President back in the late 70s. Rightly or wrongly though, that is the stereotype today.

But the way Jesus tries to explain what he is talking about doesn't fit that stereotype. Jesus is saying Nicodemus, Nicodemus (actually he is saying people, people) It's not like that. I'm not speaking literally. I'm talking about something that doesn't just fit nicely into your materialistic, self-centered world-view. He's talking about a radical newness arising out of water and the Spirit. He's talking about everyone in Christ is a new creation.

When we are Baptized with water, after our biological birth, we are born again in a new way. The Spirit from above—from God--gives birth to

the Spirit within us. And our inner Spirit needs to be alive and well in order for us to know that we are in relationship with God.

And then Jesus says the famous line:

"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.

But for some mystifying reason, no one ever seems to remember the next line. The next verse is where the really good news is.

He says: 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.* This is why it is significant that Nicodemus came in the night. He, like the rest of the world was not born again. He, like the rest of the world lived in darkness. But we know that later, he won't try to keep his love for Jesus in the dark. He will make a public showing of his love when he carries 100 lbs of myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus' dead body, freed from the judgment of darkness because for him the old life has gone a new life has begun.

We here today are all people living in the light. new creations. Born again. For one reason, by one power, not by anything we do or don't do ourselves. No matter how bad you have been or how good you are. There is one reason that you are born again and that is because God so loved the world, that he sent his only son. God so loved the whole world and everyone in it. We are not condemned to live in a dark world. We are chosen by God to live in the light.