

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent

March 5, 2023

Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church

John 3:1-17

## **A Gift for the World**

### **John 3:1-17 (EHV)**

*There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with him." Jesus replied, "Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"*

*Jesus answered, "Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God! Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above. The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

*"How can these things be?" asked Nicodemus. "You are the teacher of Israel," Jesus answered, "and you do not know these things? Amen, Amen, I tell you: We speak what we know, and we testify about what we have seen. But you people do not accept our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven."*

*"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."*

Dear Friends in Christ,

There are a couple of ways to determine if something is a great need. One is the seriousness of the problem itself. Someone who has lost a job would soon have a great need for a job to provide income. This individual need, however, would only be a need for a small percentage of people at any time. Unless, of course, there is some situation in which a majority of people were unemployed. Then the individual need is great and the need is great because so many people have the same problem.

We continue to look at our greatest needs during this season of Lent. Today's lesson from John 3 shows us a great individual need that is also a great need because it is a universal need. The world needs the gift of Christ. Every individual needs the gift of Christ. He is God's gift to the world.

### **The Gift is Given to the World**

We first consider the last verses of the section of John 3 for us today, the most familiar verses:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

Jesus makes it clear that he is the gift for the world by using the word, "world" three times. God loved the world. The Son did not come to condemn the world. The Son came to save the world. Of course,

world is not here referring to the mountains and oceans, the trees and animals. World is the people of the world. World is all the people who have lived and will live on this world. Why is Jesus the greatest need for all the people of this world?

All people would be condemned to eternal hell without Jesus. We who attend worship regularly know this, but let's take a moment to let this truth sink in. For, we are also part of the fallen human race and our sinful human nature rejects the assertion that all people are equally deserving of eternal condemnation from God. We like to play the comparison game. "At least I'm not as bad as that person. They told the obscene joke. I only laughed at it. They had an affair. I only looked at pornography. They robbed a convenience store. I only robbed God of a generous first fruit offering. They are really bad. I'm just a little bad." We can always find someone or some sin that we deem to be worthy of eternal condemnation while ours is worthy of just a slap on the wrist.

How would that work if we imagine this conversation taking place among the soldiers who crucified Christ? "I only laughed at him when other spit on him. I only spit on him while others hit him. I just made the crown of thorns...others put it on him. I just put the crown of thorns on his head...others beat it into his head with a staff. I just made him carry the cross...others hammered the nails through his hands and feet." Not one of the soldiers who crucified Christ is innocent. Every one of them deserves eternal condemnation for taking part in the crucifixion of the only-begotten Son of God. And how foolish of us to think that our so called "lesser" sins do not earn us the same verdict – eternal condemnation. For every sin is against the only-begotten Son of God.

The need for forgiveness is a universal need. The world needs the Savior. That is why John 3:16 (and 17) is such a favorite for so many in the world. This passage tells us of the universal gift of God's Son for the world. This passage tells us of the universal love of God for the world. This passage tells us of the universal declaration of not guilty, no condemnation for the world. This precious passage tells us of the universal salvation won by Christ for the world.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

If this gift is for the world, then it is also for you. The gift is universal and yet it is delivered to individuals in a special way.

### **The Gift is Given to Individuals**

*There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with him." Jesus replied, "Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"*

Nicodemus is so close to the kingdom of God. He knows that Jesus is from God, but Jesus teaches him that knowledge of Jesus is not enough to bring someone into God's kingdom. Only those who are born from above see the kingdom of God. "Born from above" is also translated as "born again." Both tell us that by nature, no one is fit for the kingdom of God. We must go through another birth. Nicodemus does not understand what Jesus is saying. Nicodemus is thinking of natural birth instead of spiritual birth.

*Jesus answered, "Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God! Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above."*

Water and the Spirit. That's baptism! Nicodemus may not have understood immediately, but we see Jesus clearly talking about baptism. Water is applied in the name of the Triune God and the Holy Spirit works faith. Paul refers to baptism as rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3). Notice that Jesus makes it clear that this is necessary to enter the kingdom of God. Being born again of water and the Spirit is not optional. He says it three times: "Unless someone is born from above...unless someone is born of water and the Spirit...you must be born from above."

Our Father in heaven gives a gift to the world by sending his only-begotten Son. He delivers that gift to individuals through baptism. One by one, precious souls are brought into the kingdom of Christ by water and the Spirit. One by one faith is given. One by one the salvation Christ won at the cross is delivered to sinners.

Jesus continues his lesson to Nicodemus. It is not mere knowledge about Jesus but trust in Jesus, faith in Jesus that saves.

*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

Jesus uses a story Nicodemus would have known well – the bronze serpent. Poisonous serpents were sent by the Lord into the Israelite camp in the wilderness. Many people were dying. God told Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole. All who looked at the bronze snake would live even if they had been bitten. The bronze snake was for all people but only those who trusted God's words through Moses looked at the bronze snake and lived. The gift was for all but only those with faith received the benefits of the gift.

So it is with Christ and his cross. The cross is a prominent feature in our churches. It is often the central focus at the front of the sanctuary. Years before it happened, Jesus pointed Nicodemus to the cross upon which Christ would be lifted. Jesus paid for every sin by his suffering and death upon that cross. But only those who look to him in faith, only those who believe receive the benefit of eternal life.

Whether Nicodemus believed at this time, we do not know. However, he did believe sometime for he was one to take Jesus' body from the cross. The gift for the world had been delivered to Nicodemus. Thanks be to the Lord for delivering his gift for the world to us individually too. The Holy Spirit came to us through the water of baptism and the Word of God.

In thanks for this gift, we look at the world around us like Jesus does. He is the gift for the world. He wants all in the world to know about him, to believe in him and to be saved. The Spirit takes care of the believing and the saving. We have the honor of participating in the teaching and in the baptizing. Let us do so with joy and zeal for the world of people around us has the same great need for God's gift of his Son that we do. We get to deliver the good news that Jesus is for all and for you.

Amen.