The Gospel of John: *For God So Loved the World*
John 3:16-21

Good morning Church! We are three days away from Christmas, and that means that you are ready for a good old-fashioned Advent message…I get it. But this morning, instead of looking at the birth narrative of Jesus, we will return to the Gospel of John precisely because our passage this morning, John 3:16-21, sets the entire context for understanding the hope we proclaim at Christmas! So, please stand, and let us read aloud John 3:16-21:

16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

My message this morning will fall under three subheadings: 1) the Good News of Christmas; 2) the Love of God; 3) the Bad News; and 4) the Universal Invitation.

I. The Good News of Christmas

As we return to John 3, let me remind you of the context. Jesus is in Jerusalem, and He is entertaining a late-evening-visit from the famous Pharisee and ruler named Nicodemus. Jesus has already informed Nicodemus that, contrary to popular belief, access into the Kingdom of God comes about not from rote observance of the Scribal law, but only for those who have been born again. When Nicodemus asks how in the world he is supposed to understand that, Jesus reveals God’s plans with these words in vss. 13-14, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, Jesus is really saying two things here that the next five verses are going to powerfully unpack.

First, Jesus defines WHO makes entrance into the Kingdom of God possible. Jesus reveals to Nicodemus that God’s plan for saving the world will come about through one man and one man only: the Son of Man. Jesus is obviously referring to Himself, and He is stating very clearly that there is no human effort, no human insight, no human experience of the divine that will afford human beings the possibility of entering into God’s Kingdom and the eternal kind of life. There is only Jesus. We must remember that in the first century, not unlike our culture, there were competing views regarding how one might be “born again” or experience “regeneration” in some way. In John’s culture, many of the Roman mystery cults claimed a pathway to rebirth. Meanwhile, in a 2013 survey of British 42-year-olds, 50% believed in heaven but only 31% believed in the existence of God! Human beings are inclined to believe they can achieve the eternal life by any various pathways. Jesus says, “No…that is wrong. There is only One who was in the beginning with God, who was God, who has now taken on flesh and dwells among us: He is the Son of Man, the Messiah, the Anointed One who has come to fulfill the prophecies and the promises of God. He is the “stairway to heaven” that Jacob saw in his
dream. The Son of Man is the way, the truth, and the life…there will be no access to the Father but through Him (John 14:6).

Then, Jesus points to HOW the Son of Man will make it possible for people to be born again such that they will have entrance into God’s Kingdom by referring to the snake-bit Israelites in Numbers 21. Let us quickly revisit that story, because it sets the context for the five verses, we will unpack this morning. If you recall, in Numbers 21 Moses is leading the Israelites through the wilderness, and the people are once again complaining. Let’s pick up the story there in Numbers 21:5:

And the people spoke against God and against Moses. “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless [mana].” Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Now…listen again to what Jesus says to Nicodemus in John 3:15: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

This is HOW God is going to save the world: the Son of Man is going to be lifted up before those who suffer under the serpent's bite, and by gazing on Him…by placing their believing faith on Him…they will be saved.

Now, note a few things here before we move on. First, note that the snake-bit Israelites did not ask for a cure…they asked that God would take away the snakes. This is typical human thinking. Our culture stays angry with God for allowing there to be snakes in the first place. We often hear people complain that if God was good, He would never allow “snakes” to come around and bite people. But the answer to this complaint is found in Genesis 3 where we learn about the Fall of Man. Sin and death came about as a result of our rebellion against God, and the serpents here in Numbers 21 remind us of that fact. When we sin and complain against God, we deserve to be bit…we deserve death…the serpents are of our own doing.

So God did not save his people then, and He does not save His people now, by removing all sources of evil and pain from the human experience. Instead, God saves the snake-bit sinners by raising up One who embodies their curse--One who absorbs the poison they deserve, if they will only look upon Him in faith.

Now, some may be wondering why Jesus associates Himself, the Son of Man, with the bronze serpent? Jesus is the Lamb of God, right? He is the Lion of Judah? We should not think of Jesus as a fiery serpent, right? Ah…but Jesus is pointing to the fact that He, the Son of Man, will become the curse on behalf of the cursed. Paul captures this perfectly in Galatians 3:13-14:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged from a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessings of Abraham might come to the Gentiles so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.
And again in 2 Corinthians 5:21: For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Do you see now what Jesus is communicating to Nicodemus? We must be born again through the Spirit, and the way we receive the promised Spirit is through faith in the One who took on the curse in our place...the One who knew no sin but became sin on our behalf, “so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Church, this is the Good News of Christmas! Jesus has come to save us; and we are saved by receiving His Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ crucified so that we might be born again and enter into the Kingdom of God. Amen!

Now, what follows next in vss. 16-21 is an explanation of what Jesus just said, and we know this because vs. 16 begins with the word, “For...” That is to say, vs. 16 looks back to what Jesus just said to Nicodemus, and it gives a reason for why it is true. That leads us to my second subheading...

II. The Love of God

The love of God. Listen for the explanation as to WHY God would choose to save the world by sending the Son of Man to be lifted up like the serpent in the desert. John 3:16, For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

God sent the Son of Man, God’s ONLY SON, into the world to save the world because He LOVED the world. He SO loved the world! Should we do nothing more than meditate upon the love of God this day, we could find no better investment of our time. One of my favorite commentators, Arthur Pink, breaks down this famous verse into 7 observations about God’s love. I will add an additional insight from another great thinker as well. Pink begins with...

1) The tense of His love: God loved. It is one thing to say that “God loves,” for we would intuit such behavior as becoming of God’s character, and we might even intuit that God loves those who are pleasing to Him—those who do what is asked of them, for example. However, it is quite another to acknowledge that while we, His creation, were in full-blown rebellion, while we were yet enemies of God (Rom. 5:8), God so loved the world that He sent His only Son! God’s love has never been contingent upon our good behavior...while we were hopelessly unlovable, God first loved us! As John writes later in 1 John 4:10:

10 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

2) The magnitude of His love: God so loved. There are no means to measure the boundless, infinite, breadth, length, depth and height of God’s love for the world. But we know His love is from everlasting to everlasting when we see that He sent His only Son.

1Many scholars believe that 16-21 is John the Apostle’s explanation of Jesus’s words in vss. 14-15. Others believe that Jesus is speaking as He continues his conversation with Nicodemus. It could legitimately be either. We must remember that the earliest Greek manuscripts lack punctuation and even sentence divisions. The words all run together, making it very difficult to discern if Jesus is still speaking in 16-21, or if what follows here is John unpacking what Jesus meant. Regardless, these are either the words Jesus spoke to Nicodemus or the truth that John learned directly from Jesus as a disciple. Either way, the truth of what we read here is from Jesus.
Should I ever claim to “so love my wife,” you would naturally be looking for the evidence of my extravagant love for Christy, right? You would be waiting to hear me say, “I so loved my wife that I gave up fishing…or that I gave her the most expensive diamond ring on the planet…or that I was willing to spend an entire day shopping with her on Black Friday!” (I love my wife, by the way, but I don’t suspect you will ever hear me say any of those things!) Pink notes that God’s love is extravagant and immeasurable precisely because He willing sacrifice to His only beloved Son to save us.

2a) The specific manner of God’s love: There is another way of understanding this word, “so” that Pink refers to as the magnitude of God’s love. My friend and New Testament scholar Phil Ledgerwood believes this word “so” does not reflect so much the magnitude of God’s love, but that this Greek word “houtous” more accurately reveals the manner in which God loves. In other words, the phrase might be better understood to say, “And this is what God’s love specifically looks like: He sent His Son.” Phil writes:

God loved the world in this way - He gave His only begotten son. I think this is useful to know because people talk all the time about what a loving God would or wouldn’t do. "A loving God wouldn't send His Son to die." Well, apparently, that is exactly what a loving God would do. Here's how God loved the world - He sent His Son into it. "I don't think a loving God would allow suffering." God did not love the world by eliminating suffering; God loved the world by sending Jesus. "I don't think a loving God would judge." God did not love the world by refraining from judgement; God loved the world by sending Jesus. That's how God loves. If you think God's love means something else, John would like to reorient you. God loved the world by sending Jesus.

The Apostle says almost the exact same thing in 1 John 4:9, “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him.” By the way, brother Phil Ledgerwood will be delivering the message next Sunday which will be a blessing for all of us.

3) Arthur Pink points out the scope of God’s love: For God so loved the world. God’s love was not exclusive to those He called His own in the Old Testament. God’s love always extended to all without boundaries….and that is still the case today.

4) Pink then points to the nature of God’s love: For God so loved the world He gave... Real love always seeks the highest interests of others. Love is unselfish…love does…love gives!

5) The sacrificial character of God’s love: For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son. God spared not His Best. He did not give out of His abundance or His excess, He gave His ONLY Son.

6) The design of God’s love: “…that whosoever believes in Him should not perish.” The design of God’s love is to have a people who will not perish. To be included in this population comes about by simply believing upon the Son.

7) The beneficence of God’s love: “…but will have everlasting life.” God’s love imparts a gift that no human soul could hope to earn or achieve. Enduring life that will flourish in every age to come beginning now…this is the promise for those who believe…for those who belong to Him.
Church, we can never come to the end of God’s love. His love accounts for why Jesus came to rescue us. The love of God accounts for the brutal cross. God so loved the world, He sent Jesus. Can we take a moment and say thank you? I think that would be appropriate.

Now, Jesus/John goes on here in vss. 17-18 to make something clear that apparently needs clarifying. John writes, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

Why does John write, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world…”? Is it not because so many people misunderstand the Gospel? Is it not because so many people then and now hear the name of Jesus and immediately assume some form of condemnation?

Herein lies one of the great tensions whenever one attempts to share the Good News of the Gospel with people in the world. Just as soon as we declare that God so loved the world that He sent His only Son to die, to be lifted up as the cursed serpent upon the tree, that all who believe upon Him might be saved…just as soon as we proclaim what should be the GREATEST NEWS EVER…many will be offended. Many will assume that you have condemned them. Why is that?

Well, to be excited about the news of a Savior first requires a human soul to knowingly NEED a Savior. The only way that we know that we need a Savior is if we have an honest awareness of our plight; in other words, we must have an awareness that we are those who deserve condemnation because of our sin, and that we are powerless to save ourselves. This may come as a shocker for some of you, but the truth is that most people do not think of themselves as sinners who are powerless to save themselves. Most people are actually offended by the very notion. There is within all people a form of self-justification that we find very hard to set aside. When someone challenges our self-justification, we are offended because we feel condemned.

Ironically, Jesus did not come into the world to convince us of our condemnation. That was already assumed! Why? Because we have God’s law written on our hearts, and God’s law should bring us under the conviction that we are in need of a Savior. So, when Jesus came into the world to save us, He came looking for those who were aware of their sin. As Jesus said in Luke 19:10, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Jesus came as the Great Physician with medicine for those who knew they were sick. As we just read in vs. 17, Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world.

And here’s the Good News for all those who know that they need a Savior: according to John 3:18, Whoever believes in Him is not condemned. As Paul writes in Romans 8:1,

There is, therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death…By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (those who have been born again!).
Those in Christ are no longer condemned…that is the Good News made possible through the mysterious, unmerited, immeasurable love of God. However, there is some Bad News as well for those who reject Jesus, and that leads me to my third subheading:

III. The Bad News
According to Jesus in vs. 18, “…whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

As I just mentioned, the law of God is such that we should see our sin and be convinced of our need for a Savior. The law condemns us based on God’s holy and just standard. That’s one form of condemnation that we find in the Bible, but there is hope for those who stand condemned under the law: their hope is in Jesus Christ crucified, the One God gave us out of His deep love for all the world. When Christ is received as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, there is no longer any condemnation under the law…the Believer is forgiven, He is welcomed into the Kingdom of God, and He has a blessed assurance of the life that is everlasting.

However, when we reject the Son, we have rejected the only Cure for our snake-bit condition. So in addition to our condemnation under the law, we are doubly condemned because we rejected the Beloved Son. Make no mistake: God has tremendous mercy and unlimited grace for those who stand condemned under the law. God so loved the sinful world that He gave us His only Son…that’s what we just read…that is the Good News of the Gospel. Those condemned under the law can be forgiven and ushered into the Kingdom through the Son as an expression of God’s infinite mercy. However, there is no grace remaining for those who reject His Beloved Son. God has no plan B for salvation; there is no other Savior coming; and the rejection of the Son will result in a condemnation that has no end. And that condemnation does not begin at the final judgment. According to what we just read, the condemnation begins now: “whoever does not believe is condemned already…”

There is no place to hide in a biblical worldview. We are either those who are saved through faith in the Son, or we are those who are already condemned. I would ask each of us to identify where we stand this morning…the text is very much calling the question.

So why in the world would anyone reject the Son? I remember when I was 14 years old and my family had recently moved to Charlotte, NC, I befriended a boy named Jason who lived in the house across the street from ours. Jason was kind and friendly to me, which I appreciated since we had just moved into the neighborhood. One evening we were talking and he admitted to me that he did not believe in God…he did not accept that Jesus was His savior. I was shocked. In my little town in WI growing up, surrounded by my Christian friends, I had never heard anyone actually say those words! I remember running home and calling my Youth Minister at our new church in a sheer panic. Why would anyone reject Jesus? How could anyone refuse the gift of forgiveness that Jesus offered on the cross?

I must admit, I still struggle with this question. For me, if Jesus is not risen…if Jesus has not reconciled me to God…I live in a world without hope, and I remain condemned in my sins, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15. But alas, there were many in the first century who rejected
Jesus, and all throughout history, and even to this day, the ratio remains the same: the vast majority reject Jesus, only a minority of people will receive Him. Why is that?

John unpacks the bad news in vss. 19-20, “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.”

Did you hear the contrast? God so loved the world…people so loved the darkness. Jesus came into the world as the Light that gives light to all men, but those who loved the darkness hated the light because the Light exposes that which they seek to keep hidden.

Church, I must ask you a question: is there yet darkness within you? If you say, “No,” I fear that you are deceiving yourselves. All Christians battle with lingering darkness to some degree…such is why Paul laments that he still does those things he shouldn’t do, and he fails to do those things he should be doing! Even the best of Christians battles some darkness within, so don’t deny that you have some darkness…that would be self-deceiving. Now here is the more important question: Do you still love the darkness within you?

If you love the darkness…if you are committed to concealing your evil works because you love them too much to quit, then here’s what I can tell you: the Light is not your friend. You hate the Light. Oh, you might be sitting in church, and you may even think of yourself as a good, religious person, but you hate the Light…you fear the Light, because you fear being exposed.

Herein lies the difference between those who have been born again and those who have not: those who have been born again HATE the darkness within them. That doesn’t mean that they don’t sin…they most certainly do, unfortunately. However, those born again HATE their sin, and they keep coming back to the LIGHT as the means of fighting back the darkness that they hate. Even on their worst day of darkness, the born-again soul seeks out the LIGHT of Christ, knowing the experience may reduce them to tears, yet they know who they love: they love the Light who first loved them, and they hate the darkness.

However, those who are not born again give quarter to darkness because they still love the darkness, and the LIGHT is not something they seek or even desire to encounter. Such is why the one who loves the darkness does not read the Bible…reading the Bible would shed light upon their beloved darkness. The one who loves darkness cannot stand to look upon the Son of God on the tree, for his darkness would be revealed in the Light of God’s perfect love.

Friend, if you love darkness…if you practice darkness with no conscience and feel justified in doing so…I can tell you, Christ is not in you. However, if you hate the darkness…if you increasingly long to be free from the chains of the darkness that have held you prisoner for so long…if you are more and more practicing the truth of God’s Word and seeking to live according to the commands of Christ—then be encouraged, the Holy Spirit is working in you…you are being born again through the power of Christ. And this is what John concludes with in vs. 21: But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.
No one can come to the Light on his own power; in our flesh, we would all hide from the light. We all tend to love darkness in our flesh. But the mystery of God’s love is that He empowers sin-sick souls to be transformed by the Light of Christ through faith, though even our faith is ultimately God’s doing as Paul writes in Ephesians 2. Here in the end of our chapter we find the age-old tension: human souls are accountable; yet we cannot come to Jesus apart from the sovereignty of God’s call upon all who would be born again. It is a tension that we can never resolve, but both are real, and both are presented here at the end of our text.

Let me conclude now with my final point, which is very brief:

**IV. The Universal Invitation**

The gospel of grace is an invitation for all people at all times in all circumstances. For God so loved THE WORLD…this includes every single person ever born…His love includes you, no matter what you have done…no matter what has been done to you. God’s love for you remains, as does the season for sin-sick souls to repent and place their faith in the Son. Let me be perfectly clear: there is nothing you must DO in order to accomplish your salvation. All that is necessary has already been accomplished in the finished work of Jesus on the cross. To receive the eternal life offered in the Gospel, we must receive Jesus…for it is only Jesus who can save us.

Our faith, then, is like the act of eating for the man who is starving. The eating does not nourish our body, it is the food that accomplishes our healing. Nevertheless, the only way that the food can do its work is if we are willing to receive it, to take it in, and allow the nourishment to bring new life to that which is all but dead.

So it is with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All are welcome; all are invited to His table; all may take of His body and His blood, all are invited to drink of His living water…all that is required is that we believe…and that we place our trust in the One who died in our place. To yield to Jesus today would be to end the constant state of condemnation that accompanies all who are far from Him. It would be to make way for the presence and the power of God’s Holy Spirit to wash you, to remake you, to transform you into something new, one who more and more looks like Jesus. To yield to Jesus would also usher you into the community of His people here and throughout the world. You would become a member of His Kingdom, and you would throw in your God-given gifts and talents to accomplish His Kingdom work on behalf of the broken, the lost, the poor, and the fatherless. To yield to Jesus would mean that you will never again walk alone…you will have instant family now and forevermore.

Friends, I invite you this day: yield to the love of God. Yield to the Son. Allow the Light of Christ to expose the darkness within you, for once brought into the light, there is no place for the darkness to hide, and that darkness does not love you. There is only One who loved you so much that He took on your curse…His name is Jesus, and He is our only hope.

I will pray now the prayer I prayed many years ago, and I invite you to pray with me if you are ready to set aside the darkness and step into His liberating Light. Let us pray.