

John 3:1-21

I did a quick search

to prove what I already knew.

I typed into the Google search bar,

most famous bible verse,

and of course,

you know what came up

—John 3:16.

“For God so loved the world,
that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whosoever believeth in him
should not perish,
but have everlasting life.”

I wasn't even raised on the King James Version;

but that isn't that what we hear in our heads?

For what feels like a long time

I've had a rather complicated relationship
with this verse.

Because it is so popular,
so commercialized,
so marketed,

—it's on t-shirts and tea towels,

aprons and coffee mugs,

decorative plaques and pencil erasers.

This verse has been wrenched,
twisted,

misrepresented,

and so often stripped

from its larger narrative....

well, it is enough to give anyone

a complicated relationship

with the most famous

of all the Bible verses.

Maybe it is because it seems for one thing,

that **we**, faithful people that we are,

when we, have latched onto that verse,
we have forgotten
that it includes *the world*.
Even as a kid, memorizing scripture,
I would individualize it
and forget the word, 'world' is important.
More often than not,
don't we internalize the verse,
for God so loved me...
but it is for God so loved the world...

The world?
Really?
Everybody, everywhere?

There is a Dennis the Menace comic,
(do you remember those?)
where Dennis and his friend Joey
go next door to Mrs. Wilson's house
and she gives them a plate
full of fresh, warm cookies.

As they leave, Joey says to Dennis,
"Wonder what we did to deserve this?"
"Listen Joey," Dennis says,
"Mrs. Wilson gave us cookies
not because we are nice
but because she's nice."¹

That's right everybody,
God gave ***the world*** cookies
not because we are nice
but because God is nice.
Of course, you know what I mean.

For God so loved the world
...not just me,
not just you,
but all the people.
It's a lot to take in,
God loving every single person,

¹ <http://yucaipamethodist.org/sermon%20--%20March%2018%202012.pdf>

even the ones I don't like
or all the ones we don't think deserve it;
all those people
who shouldn't get the cookies
until they can learn to act right.

For God so loved the world.

You know what else
we leave out of that verse?
That fact that it is part
of a larger story.
It starts out with a clandestine
meeting of the minds.

Nicodemus, the Pharisee,
knocking on Jesus' door at night.
Why night?
We don't really know the reason,
but we've got some good guesses.
Though it should strike us as odd
that Nicodemus chooses the night,
since Jesus is the light of the world.

I think the most likely reason
Nicodemus comes under the cover of night
is that he was afraid of being seen with Jesus.
This is the guy who just a chapter ago,
cleared out the Temple—
which didn't make him popular
with the religious leaders.
And then here is Nicodemus,
a respected leader;
seeking out wisdom
from a guy from Nazareth!
(Can anything good come from Nazareth?)

His buddies would never
let him live this one down.²

Nicodemus had heard
a thing or two about Jesus.
I picture him mulling over
all the small-town gossip
for a day or two.

It won't let him alone,
this news about this rabbi
from nowhere special.
Maybe he'd already gone to bed that night
only to feel restless and unable to sleep.
Best to just get up and go to the source,
he says to himself.

When he goes to see Jesus,
he says as much of a confession
as a Pharisee can muster:
*"Rabbi, we know
that you are a teacher
who has come from God;
for no one can do these signs
that you do
apart from the presence of God."*
—best to just go ahead and lay it out there
and see what he says.

But maybe because it's night
or maybe Jesus doesn't entirely trust
Nicodemus' motivation—
but whatever the reason,
Jesus doesn't agree or give a straight answer.
Instead, he says something cryptic and enigmatic,
"...no one can see the kingdom of God
without being born from above/born anew."

² <https://www.belfaircommunitychurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/2016-07-24-Born-Again-text-1.pdf>

Now, how did we get
from the signs Jesus can do
because of the presence of God
to kingdom and being born again?

Frederick Buechner imagines
what Nicodemus must have thought:
How can anyone be born
after growing old?
“Just how were you supposed to pull
a thing like that off?
How especially were you supposed to pull it off
if you were pushing sixty-five?

How did you get born again
when it was a challenge
just to get out of bed in the morning?
[Nicodemus] even gets a little sarcastic.
Could one ‘enter a second time
into the mother’s womb?’
when it was all one could do
to enter a taxi without the driver’s coming around
to give him shove from behind?”³

Sometimes, we think we know
what is going on:
but then again, that’s also how Nicodemus felt.
We know the term,
born again,
we know it well.
And while being born again
seems like a clear enough term,
it is easy to see why Nicodemus,
unfamiliar with the notion is stumped
—wasn’t he,
as a Jew,
already in God’s kingdom?

³ France Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2007) pg. 20

When we use born again,
we boil it down to an individual decision
—but doing that is like forgetting
that John3:16 includes the world,
everybody everywhere.

Being born again
is about Jesus doing something new in the world
so, we might **all** become
children of God.
Nicodemus thought he knew the tradition;
he thought he knew the rules,
the laws,
the ins and out,
after all he's a child of the covenant.

What does born again
have to do with him?

But Jesus is hinting at fresh wind blowing here,
and Nicodemus can't quite figure it out.
Like wine in water jars,
what is happening? How can this be?
Nicodemus is a smart, educated,
respected religious leader;
shouldn't he be in on what is going on?!

This happens a lot in John,
where Jesus meets people
and they aren't sure what to make of him.

Which we should take note of,
because as soon as we claim
we have Jesus all figured out
—you know what happens?

As soon as we “have things
tidied up,
labelled
and sorted into neat piles,”⁴
the wind blows through
and makes a big ole mess.

⁴ Gench, quoting Tom Wright pg.22

Giving Nicodemus some clarification,
Jesus says, "Do not be astonished that I said to you,
 'You must be born again/born anew.'
The wind 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?"

Wind and Spirit
are the same words in Greek,
 you know?
 This being born again or anew
 has something to do
 with Spirit;
 Spirit that acts like wind—
 something we can't control.

Peter Rollins, an Irish theologian,
says that God is an *event*.
 He says God is not a fact to be grasped,
 but an incoming
 to be undergone.
That sounds like the wind,
 like the Spirit,
 like being born into something
 that will change everything;
 an incoming that swirls around us
 and in us
 and can even sweep right past us
if we aren't paying attention to it.

Simone Weil, was a mystic French philosopher
in the early 20th century.
 She says we mostly see things work
 in the world
 in this way.
 The world is like gravity....
 where natural laws reign;

where things fall
and planets revolve
but also, the world is place
where affliction is often paid back with affliction,
suffering with suffering,
hatred with hatred,
war with war,
violence with violence.
This she claims,
is as natural as rocks
falling to the ground.

But there is another reality
which she calls grace.

Grace is not another world,
it **is** what **is** peppered
within gravity
that stops us from repaying
violence with violence
but payback violence with peace.
It stops us from paying hatred with hatred
but hatred with love.
It makes the universe not so one dimensional
and calls us to be better selves.

Rollins uses Simone Weil's description
to point to God as event.
That is the wind,
the Spirit an event to undergo;
something peppered into our reality;
a kingdom we get swept into.

Which makes me go back
John 3:16.

"Read against the backdrop of Nicodemus'
nighttime visit,
John 3:16 becomes...the response to him
and people like him,
and perhaps like us,

who believe they know Jesus
and who come to him
not to be turned upside down
[or born again]
by his holy newness
but to have their understanding
affirmed and settled.”⁵

If Nicodemus came to Jesus
looking for confirmation and not change;
if we come to Jesus looking for affirmation
and not transformation
then what will happen?

I’d hate for us to miss the event.

For God so loved the world,
that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him
may not perish but have eternal life.

Now, please don’t mishear me.

This event to be undergone,
I don’t think you can really miss it
but I do think you can be should we say, late...
Which is to say,
I think we could spend our lives
missing the grace that is peppered throughout it.
Meaning this event to undergo,
that began in Christ,
has always been going on,
since all things came into being through him.

This event, being born again
is here for us now,
so that we might experience eternal life,

⁵ Meda Stamper, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/the-holy-trinity-2/commentary-on-john-31-17>

grace and newness
right now, in this life,
with each other,
with and within the world.

Nicodemus came to Jesus,
the light of the world
under the cover of night.
He came to have Jesus confirm or deny
that God was with him.
And he left having heard
that Son of God
was God in the flesh.

Did Nicodemus feel that rush of wind
as he and Jesus spoke
and notice that the trees weren't moving?
Because in the midst of that swirling, and sweeping,
the newness that the Spirit stirs,
there stands an affirmation.
An affirmation in the way of a famous bible verse.
Which means it is not so strange
that a conversation that began about birth
should lead us to a most profound
and meaningful
a statement about life.⁶

For God so loved the world
that he gave his only begotten Son
that whosoever believeth in him
shall not perish
but have everlasting life.

⁶ibid