

**NEW VISION UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**  
**1600 Mangrove Avenue, Suite 177**  
**Chico, California 95926**  
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**11:00 -- Sunday Celebration Worship**

**“About That Sign At the Stadium”**

December 6, 2015  
Advent Two

Preached by: Jim Peck, Pastor

Scripture Readings: John 3: 1 - 21

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Will you pray with me? Illuminating God, as we open your Word this morning, help us to understand how it speaks to us for the living of these days. Amen.

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Nicodemus is a person you should know. He appears three times in the Gospel of John. This time in John 3, when he comes to Jesus with a question. Then, in John 7, when Jesus is being attacked by the Pharisees, he advocates for Jesus. The last time is in John 19, when he helps bury Jesus. It is clear that at some point between John 3 and John 19, Nicodemus becomes a follower of Jesus.

In John 3, Nicodemus is interested and curious about Jesus. He recognizes him as a teacher who has come from God. Still, he knows Jesus is controversial. As a Pharisee himself, a member of the reform movement that demanded strict adherence to the Jewish law, especially the laws regarding keeping the Sabbath, Nicodemus knew about the tension between the Pharisees and Jesus.

Thus, it is not incidental that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. He did not want to be seen talking to this controversial figure. Of course, in the symbolic language of John's Gospel, night is a contrast to light, and John describes Jesus more than once as the light of the world. In John 3, Nicodemus has not yet seen Jesus as the light of the world.

This dialog has another phrase shot through with multiple meanings. That phrase is “born again.” We don't use that phrase very often in the United Church of Christ. It's not our way of being Christian. There are other ways of being Christian that use it, and use it very often. In the ways of being Christian that emphasize an individual relationship with Jesus, born again is a shorthand way of speaking of conversion, that moment when a person who has not been a follower of Jesus decides to become a follower of Jesus.

I heard it often when growing up Baptist. Sometimes a person will ask me “Have you been born again?” I say “Yes, I have.” I can tell them the date I made the decision to follow Jesus - October 31, 1971, which you will hear as Halloween and I will remind you is also Reformation Day. I can tell them the place - Briarcliff Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia.

This level of detail is usually satisfactory to protect me from a longer conversation. On the other hand, it is my testimony. There is in my life a moment when I made a decision to follow Jesus, when I understood God's mercy, grace, and love for the whole world are meant for me, when I decided to give my life to following Jesus. I was not coerced. I decided freely.

*Anothen*, the Greek word translated as "born again" can also be translated as born anew or born from above. Nicodemus took the term literally to mean physical birth. Jesus then spends a good bit of time trying to help Nicodemus understand it is a spiritual experience, a newness from the inside out. Although like the wind, being born again is a mystery, like the wind, it is an experience. We may not know where the wind comes from or where it goes, but we know there is wind. We see and hear evidence in the rustling leaves, and we feel it on our face. The wind is real. Being born from above by the movement of the Spirit of God is real.

In the middle of this reading is John 3:16. Baptist boys and girls memorize this verse before we learn to read and write. (Quote from memory) "For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

In many ways, it is a summation of the core assertions of Christian faith. The verse affirms the initiative of God in coming and taking on human form in Jesus and living among us, the initiative Christmas celebrates. And, it affirms that believing in Jesus changes our relationship to God from one that is distant to one that is up close and personal.

(A powerpoint slide show was displayed. Due to copyright matters, we are not able to make it available.)

So, John 3:16 shows up in the most unusual places. If you watch televised sports, you will see fans of Jesus holding signs at the stadium with John 3:16 on them. No one ever holds up these signs at a symphony concert . . . probably because it is not televised.

Some athletes who play on the Jesus team display John 3:16 on their bodies, like this tattoo.

It will show up at the press conference after your team wins the championship which, of course, would not have happened unless the team had been born again after several not very winning seasons.

And, for those of you who are not sports fans, it will show up in other places as well. This drinking cup from In-n-Out, and this shopping bag from Forever 21.

Last Tuesday night, at the World AIDS Day event, a woman I know from the community came up to me. She was holding a one dollar bill. She pointed to it and said, "What is this?" John 3:16 was written there on the dollar bill. She knew it was a Bible verse and she wanted to know what it said.

So I quoted it to her. And then I quoted John 3:17 as well, which I think is just as important: "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved."

God loves each of us. God loves the whole world. God came into the world in Jesus to demonstrate God loves each of us. God came into the world in Jesus to demonstrate God loves the whole world. It's not one or the other. It's both at the same time. God loves the whole world and God loves each person. No one is left out. Everyone is brought in.

One verse is never enough to tell the whole story of God's mercy, grace, and love. John 3:16 is beautiful, and John 3:17 is equally beautiful, and they go together.

When I see the signs at the stadium, on the bottom of the shopping bag (not that I ever shop at Forever 21 - they really don't carry my size) . . . When I see John 3:16 proclaimed on the signs at the stadium, on the bottom of the shopping bag, or on a dollar bill, I know there's more to the meaning of Jesus than just my personal decision, my personal relationship with God.

There's certainly more to following Jesus than the promise of life after death, which is a whole 'nother sermon.

There's also the question of what I do with my life now as I live in the world God loves so much and wants to save. Our United Church of Christ statement of faith affirms "God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin."

Is there any doubt our world needs to be saved from aimlessness? From confusion about what we should be doing with our planet, from uncertainty about how to treat each other justly and kindly?

Is there any doubt that our world needs to be saved from sin, from our willful acts that harm our neighbor and ourselves, from our unthinking acts that harm our neighbor and ourselves?

A couple of weeks ago, I spoke at a class at Chico State. The class was on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues. The professor asks me to speak to the class every year. He is clear - he wants a Christian pastor who will counterbalance all the condemnation of LGBT persons that gets all the attention.

A student asked me if my church believes in sin. I said yes, we do. But we don't have a list of behaviors categorized by whether or not it is a sin. We encourage people to apply this filter to their actions: Will it harm me or someone else? If the answer is "yes, it will," then we urge people to consider their actions more carefully. Or, if reflecting on something already done, to apply the filter as they reflect on what they have done. That seems to be the standard Jesus set.

Is there anything more aimless and sinful than taking an assault rifle into a room filled with your work colleagues and trying to kill them all? No matter who you are, no matter where you're from, no matter where you are on life's journey, that's a sin.

Most of our actions neither harm ourselves or others, because, over time, we learn to act honorably towards others and responsibly towards ourselves. If you follow Jesus, you'll learn how to act honorably and responsibly. And that's how the world gets saved, a little bit at a time. That's how the reign of God becomes reality in our time and place.

Individuals born anew by the Spirit of God save the world by living lives that demonstrate the love God has for them, and for the world. That's how the world gets saved.

Amen.

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