



“There’s Nothing Like a Mother’s Love”

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Scripture (TPT):

John 3:1-10, 16-17

3 Now there was a prominent religious leader among the Jews named Nicodemus, who was part of the sect called the Pharisees and a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² One night he discreetly came to Jesus and said, “Master, we know that you are a teacher from God, for no one performs the miracle signs that you do, unless God’s power is with him.”

³ Jesus answered, **“Nicodemus, listen to this eternal truth: Before a person can perceive God’s kingdom realm, they must first experience a rebirth.”**

⁴ Nicodemus said, “Rebirth? How can a gray-headed man be reborn? It’s impossible for a man to go back into the womb a second time and be reborn!”

⁵ Jesus answered, **“I speak an eternal truth: Unless you are born of water and Spirit-wind, you will never enter God’s kingdom realm. ⁶ For the natural realm can only give birth to things that are natural, but the spiritual realm gives birth to supernatural life!**

⁷ **“You shouldn’t be amazed by my statement, ‘You must be born from above!’ ⁸ For the Spirit-wind blows as it chooses. You can hear its sound, but you don’t know where it came from or where it’s going. So it is within the hearts of those who are Spirit-born!”**

⁹ Then Nicodemus replied, “But I don’t understand, what do you mean? How does this happen?”

¹⁰ Jesus answered, **“Nicodemus, aren’t you the respected teacher in Israel, and yet you don’t understand this revelation?**

¹⁶ **For this is how much God loved the world—he gave his one and only, unique Son *as a gift*. So now everyone who believes in him will never perish but experience everlasting life.**

¹⁷ **“God did not send his Son into the world to judge and condemn the world, but to be its Savior and rescue it!**

Sermon:

“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.”[John 3:16, KJV]

That’s the way we learned it in Sunday School at the Southern Baptist church I grew up in. We repeated and repeated and repeated that Bible verse as if it was the only one that mattered, the only one worth memorizing. We were being groomed to make a personal decision to believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. To my childhood mind, that seemed like a pretty good *quid pro quo*: I believe in Jesus and God doesn’t perish me.

Later I learned there was more to the Bible than just isolated verses. I learned about something called context . . . that the best meaning of a verse emerges from paying attention to what comes before and after . . . that even a John 3:16 gets better not by quoting it more often or more fervently, but by looking at all of John chapter 3, or all of The Gospel According to John, or all of the New Testament, or even the whole Bible, all of it.

Take for example the voice of God speaking to worshippers in the temple in Psalm 50, verse 9 from the RSV: *“I will accept no bull from your house.”* Sounds a bit like students rallying at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida doesn’t it? “We call BS!”

But that’s out of context. In context, God is saying: “You can’t *give* me a sacrificial bull because I already own the cattle on a thousand hills. I don’t need the blood of sacrificial bulls as food. Make me a sacrifice of thanksgiving! Honor me with your whole life!” *Context.*

In 1987, a letter appeared in the Q&A column of the Chicago Sun Times, *The Straight Dope*.

“What’s with those ‘John 3:16’ signs people hold up at football games? . . . Usually the person is sitting at either end of the stadium so that when a kicker goes to kick an

extra point and the camera shot is from his back, the sign being waved is clearly visible. Am I missing out on something? What the [H . . . E . . . double hockey sticks] does John 3:16 mean? Is it a hex on the kicker? Is it a riddle? Is it the same person? I'm perplexed."

The person who wore a rainbow wig and waved signs at sporting and other events through the 1970's and 1980's was Rollen Stewart, raised right here in Spokane. I mention Rollen not to question his sincerity or passion. Rather, his story reminds all of us . . . his Christian brothers and sisters . . . that there is more to biblical context than just reading the words that come before and after a particular verse on the pages of the Holy Bible.

But let's at least start there . . . the before and after of John 3:16 . . . which I unreservedly admit is one of the most important verses in the entire Bible.

So . . . John 3:1-10 . . . the before. There's a story here. Jesus and Nicodemus, "a leader of the Jews", are the characters. There's a simple plot to the story: Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a request. Much like the letter writer to the Sun Times, Nicodemus is perplexed . . . by Jesus. He asks for Jesus's help in understanding what he sees. Many of us can relate. When we look at Jesus, we may be perplexed.

To help Nicodemus "see" what he is all about, Jesus uses a metaphor. He talks about heavenly things in terms of an earthly thing. He talks to Nicodemus about birth and birthing . . . about being born "again," or "anew," or "from above." Long to short, Jesus says to Nicodemus and to us, "What you see when you look at 'these signs [amazing, perplexing deeds] [I do]' is God birthing the Kingdom of God into the world. Ponder the wonder and mystery of the birth of a human being and you will begin to understand me and understand God."

Now, as a male human being, the closest I've ever gotten to human birth is as a "coach" to my wife Gloria when she birthed our son Patrick and our daughter Brynn. A woman would

undoubtedly preach a much more powerful sermon about God's birthing the "Kingdom of God" than I am able to. But my experience as a witness of birthing has left indelible impressions on my memory and heart. Birth is like the wind: it comes under its own power . . . in its own time . . . in the midst of ordinary life . . . irresistibly . . . once begun there's no stopping it . . . the mother works with the raw, biological force as a co-creator, pushes with the contractions. And the result! The newborn child . . . absolutely unique . . . now no longer in utero . . . no longer immersed in the waters of the womb . . . now absolutely separate . . . the uterus has let go, but the mother never lets go. The child is absolutely bonded to the mother by mother love. Jesus says to Nicodemus: "That's me!" John 3:16 says that God loves the world just "so". Not "so" as in *how much* but "so" as *like this*. The Spirit of Mother God gives birth to the world and to the "Kingdom" of God like a human mother gives birth to a child. Jesus was saying: when you see me, see *that*. There's nothing like a mother's love!

Context.

Back to the story and the rest of the context. Nicodemus gets all hung up on the "again" part of Jesus's metaphor of "born again" as birthing . . . on the impossibility of entering the womb for a second time. Again, like we often do. We may get hung up or stuck on having to believe such and such a doctrine or say such and such a prayer. Jesus says the birthing he's talking about is God's doing, not ours. We are witnesses of God's birthing . . . or co-creators.

To help us on through any stuckiness, the context continues with verse 17. Jesus goes on to talk about what God's love is like: "*For God sent not the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.*" [KJV] Or as Eugene Peterson puts in his translation, *The Message*: "*God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.*"

Bruce Cockburn's song "*Child of the Wind*" parallels what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus:

Little round planet in a big universe
Sometimes it looks blessed, sometimes it looks cursed
Depends on what you look at, obviously
Even more it depends on the way that you see.

How did Nicodemus see the world? Perhaps as threatening, conflicted, disintegrating? How do you and I see the world? Do we see it like it is? Or do we see it like *we* are? How did Jesus see the world, the "cosmos"? He was a realist. He saw the world as IT was . . . in its brokenness and suffering. He also saw it as HE was, as Mother God in human form unbreakably bonded to each unique and precious creature and person by Mother love. Does a mother see her child's hurts and misdeeds? Yes. And what is a mother's response? Let me put verse 17 this way: [While repeating the verse . . . take several sheets of paper. Tear into several pieces. Crumble loosely into balls. Toss them away. Pick them up. Smooth them out. Hold together.] For God SO loved the world . . . loved the world in THIS way. There's nothing like a mother's love! *Context.*

So, I have been wrestling with John 3:16 . . . again . . . like Jacob wrestling with God. Could this hallmark Christian Bible verse reach me beyond the boundaries of Sunday School memorization and theological correctness? Is there more to John 3:16 than just a riddle, more than just a magical incantation to eternal life?

Well, thank God, yes! The depth and truth of John 3:16 struck home with me Friday as Gloria and I sat with Lorna, Pastor Andy, Barb, Hannah and several hundred others at *The Fig Tree* recognition and fund-raising luncheon held on the Gonzaga campus. I saw faces—not prejudices, food—not weapons, testimonial videos—not bombast and epithets, tables and bridges—not walls. I saw how in this time and in this place Mother God has a labor and delivery room for birthing the Kingdom of God into the cosmos. I saw people pushing with the contractions. I witnessed the Wind/Spirit of God blowing . . . powerful, free, moving,

shaping, directing. I saw understanding, vision, bonds of love forged in cooperative work, celebrating variety and diversity, recognizing fundamental human experience, spirit and aspiration. I saw the irresistible force of God loving the world as brothers and sisters, all children of God, loved each other.

Thanks be to God for Mary Stamp and all those who work with her and support *The Fig Tree*. This is a living parable of biblical proportions and significance . . . one of many in our world. Maybe a proper Lenten discipline is to find others. As Jesus said, those who have eyes to see, let them see. There's nothing like a mother's love. There's nothing like a father's love, either. With God's help we can learn to see them in a way that both are fully true. But that's for another day.

I close with a verse from what I not at all facetiously or lightly call "The Gospel According to Saint Sagan." In his book *The Varieties of Scientific Experience: A Personal View of the Search For God*, Sagan writes:

Today the typical person on Earth is obviously a patchwork quilt of political, economic, ethnic, and religious identifications, owing allegiance to a group or groups consisting of a hundred million people or more. It's clear that there is a steady trend, if the trend continues, there will be a time, probably not so far in the future, when the average person's typical identification is with the human species, with everyone on Earth. [Sagan 9:215]

Mother God is still in labor. The Realm of God is being born, right here, right now. We who follow Jesus are invited to push with the contractions. AMEN.