

“A Sign”

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[John 3:1-17](#)

You’ve probably all seen the signs. No, I’m not talking metaphorically here. I’m talking about literal signs. They are held up by people at large televised events. Those holding up the signs don’t seem to be interested in the event they are attending. They seem to be attending just to hold up the sign in hopes of getting the attention of the TV crew, so that their sign can be broadcast around the world. What’s on the signs? “John 3:16.” It’s a shorthand of sorts. It is a quick way of communicating something to a large audience. That something is a verse from the text we read this morning. John 3:16. Every child growing up in the church has heard this verse repeatedly. It is likely the single-most memorized verse of scripture around the world. That verse has been called “the Bible in a nutshell” and people hold up signs with “John 3:16” to try to get others to look up that verse as an introduction to Christianity. The verse is the subject of a book by author Max Lucado, called simply *3:16*. It is maybe the only verse that every one of us here can quote from memory, probably most of us in the King James Version: “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.” We know this verse well. And yet, I imagine that many of us do not know the context of the verse. We do not know why it was that Jesus said these words so long ago. We have for so long taken this verse out of its context that we may think that it has no context at all – it is a verse that stands all alone in our Bibles. Perhaps it should be printed on the cover of the Bible as a summary with a note below that says “for more information, read this book.” And yet, the context is important.

Jesus originally said these familiar words to a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Now, we are conditioned to give a silent “boo” when we hear of a Pharisee, but that’s not necessarily fair. They were sincere religious folks, trying their best. They were more concerned about the letter of the law and less about the heart than Jesus wanted them to be. This particular Pharisee, Nicodemus, came to Jesus late at night. We’re not told why that is; it could be that he was trying to avoid the crowds so as to have some in-depth conversation with Jesus or it could be that his fellow Pharisees wouldn’t be too pleased with him talking with Jesus. For whatever reason, Nicodemus comes late at night to Jesus and he starts out with a compliment. Jesus responds with a statement that knocks Nicodemus off balance: you cannot see the kingdom of God without being born from above. The word used here can be translated either “born from above” or “born again” and Nicodemus takes the second meaning, asking Jesus how someone can be born a second time. Jesus repeats His original statement in a different way, telling Nicodemus that he must be born of water and Spirit.

It is from this passage that Christians get the oft repeated phrase “born again.” There are Christians who repeat it as a mantra. Politicians will claim they are “born again Christians.” People will ask “are you ‘born again?’” The phrase is loaded and has some baggage to it. The question is asked as if it is an action that we ourselves take. If I say that I am “born again,” am I saying that I have somehow caused myself to be born a second time? Is it all up to me? The Biblical scholar Scott Black Johnson points out that Jesus makes it clear in John chapter 3 that getting “born again” is something with which we have very little to do. It is something that comes from God and the Spirit. Babies don’t decide to get born, they just *get born*. Nicodemus was right – this business of being “born again” is impossible, from the human side of things. Being “born again” is really about submitting to God’s will for our lives. It is about allowing God to take over our lives. It is an act of God for which we should be eternally grateful. Being “born again” is to

accept God's offer of everlasting love rather than to ignore it. It is to embrace God's love rather than abuse it by taking it for granted.

And then Jesus gets to the heart of the matter, the "Bible in a nutshell." He gets to just why it is that God would want us to be "born again." He tells Nicodemus that God loved the world so much that He chose to give His only Son to us, so that through Him, we could have life everlasting. This is the heart of the gospel. It is the good news. And those holding up "John 3:16" signs may or may not get the power of these words. Sometimes we act like we need to deserve what God gives us. We try to prove that we are good enough or faithful enough or holy enough or smart enough to earn the love we receive from God. We act like we must work so hard to earn God's love in order for God to accept us, to let us in. Maybe that's the way it is in human relationships. Maybe we have to work to earn each other's love. Maybe we have to keep working hard to keep someone in love with us. Or, maybe we *think* that's the case. But if you have not yet had an experience of unearned love from another here on earth, I hope that you will. The joy of having someone say to you "I love you" and when you answer "what for?" the answer comes back "just because." Not because you have worked hard to earn that love. Not because you are deserving of that love. "Just because." And if you've felt that love from someone here on earth, maybe you have a tiny glimpse of the love of God for you. We can never earn the love of God. We can never be good enough or work hard enough for God to love us the way He does. Why does God love us? "Just because." Just because He created us for Himself. Just because He created us in His image to be His own. And we are the ones who put up barriers to God's love. We require too much of ourselves and of others. We forget that it is about God loving us, not because we did anything for God. We do not earn God's love. We do not merit God's love. God does not look down from heaven and say "She is a holy person – I'll love her." And the joy is that the reverse is also not true. God does not look down and say "Oh, look at that sinner. I do not love him."

For God so loved the world that He gave us the chance to respond to that love. And that is why we are here this morning. That is why there are millions upon millions gathered in churches and homes around the world, worshipping God. Because God so loves us. We gather to soak in that love – to feel God’s warm embrace. We gather to know that there is nothing we can do about it; that we cannot earn God’s love and we can’t keep God from loving us. God will love us no matter what we do. Parents know this feeling, on a much more limited scale. Parents will always love their children, no matter what they do. How much more does God love us? Enough that He would send His only Son to earth for us, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

What does God ask in return? That we accept the gift of His love. That we accept the claim He has on each of our lives. That we act in love toward others and toward God. That we reflect the love of God, bestowed freely on us, to a world in *desperate need* of that love. That we become the hands and feet of God here on earth. And then, Jesus tells us that we will have eternal life with God.

That is certainly worth holding a sign up. Maybe we should put John 3:16 on our cars, on signs in our yards, on our business cards, on the doors of our workplaces. Or even better, maybe we should respond to the love of God in such a way that we are *living signs* of God’s love, so that we point others to the love of our creator God in all that we do. Amen