

Lent II (RCL/A): "A Twenty-Six Word Parade of Hope"  
Psalm 121; John 3:1-17  
February 28-March 1, 2026  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"The Hope diamond of the Bible" is what Max Lucado calls John 3:16. He writes:

A twenty-six word parade of hope: beginning with God, ending with life, and urging us to do the same. Brief enough to write on a napkin or memorize in a moment, yet solid enough to weather 2,000 years of storms and questions. If you know nothing of the Bible, start here. If you know everything in the Bible, return here. We all need the reminder.<sup>1</sup>

Reminder of **what?** That:

*... God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)*

Martin Luther called John 3:16 the Gospel in miniature. It's a magnificent, beautifully carved cameo of God's love for us. It's a reminder that our picture is on God's refrigerator, our name is carved into the palm of God's hand. We've all seen someone take a pen and write a phone number, a date, or another reminder of some kind on their hand. When I was a hospital chaplain, I saw nurses do that a lot: a person's blood pressure, oxygen level, whatever they didn't want to forget. God doesn't intend to forget **us**. I've gotta admit, there's no actual mention of refrigerators in the Bible, but in Isaiah we **do** read:

*See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.... (Isaiah 49:16)*

It's so interesting that God's-love-in-Jesus is the centerpiece of this scholarly conversation in the dark between Jesus and this fellow named Nicodemus. Nicodemus seeks Jesus out at night because – we're not sure, but we have guesses. He's a big man on campus, a leader, a Pharisee, a serious, educated kinda guy, almost certainly a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council that gathered, religiously governed, and made important decisions. Nicodemus probably didn't want to show his hand that he thought Jesus might

be exceptional in some way. He wanted to scope Jesus out in private without his colleagues knowing. He didn't want to commit himself prematurely.

The other 3 evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, don't mention Nicodemus at all. St. John seems to be the only one in-the-know about him. He has two cameo appearances in the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel. This one and another, after the crucifixion, when he helps "*Joseph of Arimathea, who was [also] a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his [similar] fear of the Jews,*" (John 19:38-42) remove Jesus body from the cross, wrap it in a clean cloth layered with spices, and lay it in the tomb.

Jesus and Nicodemus are having a heavy theological conversation, and Jesus is frustrated that Nicodemus is slow on the uptake. Nic confesses his puzzlement over what it means to be born again or to be born from on high: "*What do you mean by this? How does this happen?*" (John 3:9b) and Jesus shoots back, "*You're a respected teacher of Israel and you don't know these basics?*" (John 3:10, *The Message*) "Get with it, guy!"

Knowing that Nicodemus knows Scripture like the back of his hand, Jesus brings up a story from the Old Testament, the Book of Numbers. The Israelites were wandering somewhat aimlessly through the desert and becoming grumpier by the day. They're complaining about everything. First they complain they don't have anything to eat, and then they complain about manna being on the menu. So God sends poisonous snakes that bite and kill many of the complainers. The people plead with Moses to plead with God to stop the carnage. Moses does, and God tells Moses to set a bronze serpent on a pole, direct the people to look at it and pray for deliverance. They do and they are healed, not by the bronze serpent but by God. The bronze serpent may have been to remind them of themselves -- that they had venom dripping from their lips as they endlessly complained.

Ask God for deliverance, sure, but don't forget to turn away from faithless behavior and turn over a new leaf.

*"And 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." (John 3:15)*

That word "*lifted up*" means for a person to be exalted, for a king to be enthroned, and also for a man to be crucified. Jesus is lifted up on the cross, we look upon Him and see the different ways in which we have crucified Love. Our hearts are struck to the core, we ask for healing of our sins, and we receive it, because of the death and resurrection of Christ.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)*

We hear "*God so loved the world*" and we think, "God loved the world so much," but it actually means, "God loved the world in this way: that he gave his only Son...." In John's Gospel "the world" is often a negative reference to those who do not believe and who are walking in darkness, not light. Regardless, God loves even this fallen, frequently faithless world! God loves us, at our absolute worst, individually and corporately. And God doesn't love in a distant, safe way, but up close and personal by sending "*his only Son.*"

Nicodemus would have heard "*his only Son*" and immediately thought of the story in Genesis about Abraham's obedient willingness to sacrifice his only son Isaac. He would have known how God told Abraham:

*"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." (Genesis 22:2)*

Nicodemus also would have known that at the last moment an angel caught Abraham's hand holding the knife and said:

*“Don’t lay a hand on that boy! Don’t touch him! Now I know how fearlessly you fear God; you didn’t hesitate to place your son, your dear son, on the altar for me.” (Gen. 22:12, The Message)*

We believe that our God placed God’s Son, God’s dear Son, God’s only Son, on the altar for us. Why?? Because God loves us, even when we’re at our most unlovable. This is how God loves us: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* (John 3:16)

A twenty-six word parade of hope... Brief enough to write on a napkin or memorize in a moment... If you know nothing of the Bible, start here. If you know everything in the Bible, return here. We all need the reminder.<sup>2</sup>

Amen

<sup>1</sup>Max Lucado, *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 165.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham