

Lent 2 3/1/2026
John 3:1-17 A

“FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD, THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE”.

Imagine a man with two sons. One son runs wild -- squanders the family name, wastes his inheritance in prodigal living, ends up feeding pigs.

You know the story. One day, he comes home. Dirty. Barefoot. Rehearsing his apology. But before he can finish, his father runs to him. Wraps his arms around him. Calls for a feast. Gives him a robe, a ring, and a seat at the table.

But what about the older brother? He stands outside the party. Arms crossed. He's livid, furious -- not because his brother came back, but because the father welcomed him without conditions. *“All these years I've been slaving for you... and you never threw me a party.”*

You see, the older brother thought love had to be earned. But the father wasn't celebrating obedience -- he was celebrating a relationship restored. The prodigal was lost -- and now found. Dead -- and now alive. That's the love of God. Not earned. Not calculated on a ledger. Just given. Freely.

And the tragedy? The only one who missed out ... was the one who thought he deserved it. That's the warning. That's the beauty. God's love is for the lost, the broken, the humble.

John 3:16. This morning, Jesus teaches us about the love of God in that verse we call the Gospel in a nutshell. Martin Luther once commented on this verse, “[these are] words which are able to make the sad happy, the dead alive, if only the heart believes them firmly”.

The story of HOW God loved the world begins with creation. God called everything into being by His Word: the sun, moon, and stars; the fish of the sea, birds of the air; the beasts of the field; and every living creature, including us. When creation was complete, God pronounced, *it [was] very good* (Ge 1:31). God loved the world He created. Even when God made known His will to Adam and Eve – they could eat of “*every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,*” they were not to eat -- it was surely not because He wanted to make life difficult for them. Rather, it was because He loved them. God’s Law is summarized in a single word: “LOVE”! God loved His creation and His creatures and wanted them to live in harmony with Him and with one another forever and ever, without end.

Tragically, however, we did eat of that forbidden tree and fell under God’s condemnation. Now, God’s Law shows us our sins. It shows how rebellious human beings turn in on themselves and make an agony of the life that God intended from the very beginning to be a blessing. In case there was any doubt about God’s real intent, Jesus sharpened what God meant. Jesus taught:

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire" (Mt 5:21-22).

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:27-28).

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father

who is in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mt 5:43-45).

Jesus makes it all the more clear how impossible it is for us sinful people to keep perfectly God’s righteous demands. Any infraction means that the creature that God loved so dearly must die eternally. But, the Good News of the Gospel is that it is not God’s desire that we die and perish. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”*.

“For God so loved the world”. I always thought those words, “so loved” meant that God’s love was so great, so immense, so enormous, that He sent His Son to save us. Know what? That’s really not what it means. In John 3:16, the Greek word actually means “in this manner; in this way”. In other words, the verse really reads, “God loved the world in this way, in this manner, that He gave His only Son”.

Why do I bring this up? Have you ever wondered, “Does God really love me?” Have you doubted God’s love for you? God wants you to know that He loves you! So that you would know God loves you with all certainty and confidence, He showed His love by sending His Son to die for you.

Anyone could die on a cross. In fact, thousands did; all you had to be was a criminal or an enemy of the Roman government. But, only one person could do it for you – Jesus, very God of very God.

In His earthly ministry, Jesus did many things for many people – He made the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, He raised the dead. He did these miracles really for those upon whom He performed the miracle. But, there is one thing that He could do for everyone – **die**. We are saved, My Friends, because Jesus died on the cross. Because we did not keep

the Law in our thoughts, words, or deeds, Jesus had to suffer and die for our sin. Jesus died “for” you – in your place, as your substitute.

Have you ever heard that old saying, “One picture is worth a 1,000 words”? Throughout the Scriptures, God tells you time and time again that He loves you. But, if you still doubt; if you are still uncertain; look to Jesus dying on the cross. Luther once said, “We see the deepest into the heart of God when we see His Son hanging on the cross”.

“God so loved the world”. So, He showed His love by sending His Son for the world, “that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”. “Whoever believes”. We are saved by faith alone, apart from works. In our Epistle, Paul uses the example of Father Abraham to teach us this. *“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”*, Paul writes, quoting the words of Moses from Genesis (Ro 4:3). Then, Paul continues, *And to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness (4:5)*. “Whoever believes,” Jesus says.

Yet, father of all lies twisted and turned these words so that many misunderstand them. “Salvation isn’t free,” many will cry. “I have to believe!” You know that lie: Jesus did His part, now I have to do my part. But, this misunderstands faith. Faith is not something we do. Faith is not an act of our will; a decision we make. Faith is a gift from God. Faith is God’s work in you. Whenever the Lord tells you to believe in Him, He is giving you the faith to believe. The Apostle Paul says it this way, *Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Ro 10:17)*.

Let me give you an example of this, an example from Scripture itself. By the time Jesus comes to Bethany, Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. But, Jesus speaks, *“Lazarus, come out”* and Lazarus

came out of the grave -- alive (Jn 11). When Jesus gave the command, His words literally breathed life into Lazarus. His words gave to power and ability to fulfill that command. When the Bible says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," He gives you faith to believe.

In the water and the Word of your Baptism, God the Holy Spirit works that faith in you and makes you a new creation in Christ, so that you trust, rejoice, and find comfort in Jesus alone. You live in Jesus. As He is risen from the grave, you are raised to a new life, and eternal life, in Him.

And so that you do not perish, God continues to sustain and strengthen that faith He began at your baptism. In the proclamation of the Word, Jesus breathes His words of eternal life into you, for the forgiveness of your sins and the strengthening of your faith. In Holy Communion, Jesus gives you His flesh and blood to eat and drink for the forgiveness of sins, and where there is forgiveness, there is life and salvation. God does His work in you through His Word, so that you may believe and eternal life.

When the great Reformer of the Church lay dying on his deathbed, he kept repeating, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son". Luther knew that his only comfort, his only hope, for himself and for all sinful humanity – including you and me – is that God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son to the death of the cross, so that you need never fear death, but know that you have everlasting life in Jesus.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.