

"See the Light"

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, open our hearts to live in the light of Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.**

In the early 1960s, the publishers of Time Magazine were concerned about their declining circulation, so they designed a campaign to send out thousands of letters making an emotional appeal to potential subscribers. Previously, such mailings had been prepared manually, at great cost. At that time, IBM was developing customized commercial computers and IBM made a proposal to install a fully automated system that would type the letters, seal the envelopes, address them according to a selected database, stamp them and send them into the postal system without the letters ever being touched by a human hand. The huge computer was installed with much fanfare and anticipation. However, as is still often the case with computers, there was a glitch, and as a result, a rancher in Wyoming received 12,634 letters appealing to him to subscribe to Time Magazine. The surprised rancher, who didn't usually get much mail, opened the mailbags, and started reading the letters. After reading a few dozen, he decided to send in a \$6 cheque for a subscription.

That kind of persuasion is hard to resist! But 12,634 letters from an IBM computer is nothing compared to God's persuasion, persistence, and power in our lives!

Our reading from the gospel according to John contains the best known and most loved verse of the whole Bible: "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." It's John 3:16.

We need to put John 3:16 into context. In our gospel passage today, Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin counsel and a religious leader of the Jewish people. Nicodemus visits Jesus at night. In the darkness of night, no one sees Nicodemus. In the darkness of night,

Nicodemus spends time with Jesus without anyone knowing. In the darkness of night, Nicodemus meets privately with Jesus without it impacting his job. In the darkness of night, Nicodemus talks to Jesus and maybe he even decides in his heart to have faith in Jesus without disrupting his comfortable and established life. But Jesus impresses upon Nicodemus that there is no way to follow Jesus without Jesus changing your life. For the light of Christ is the light of the world, the light that shines in the darkness that the darkness cannot overcome.

Jesus refers to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. He's referring to the story in the Old Testament book of Numbers where the Israelites in the wilderness are rebelling against Moses and against God, and they become infested with poisonous serpents. God instructs Moses to make the likeness of a serpent and lift it up on a pole for all to see and "everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." The serpent figure lifted up on the pole protects the people from serpents in their lives and they're saved.

The Greek word that's translated "lifted up" also means "exalted" and both meanings must be understood simultaneously. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must Jesus be lifted up on the cross. On Easter morning, Jesus is lifted up from death and then later, Jesus is lifted up to heaven. John understands Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension as one continuous event where being lifted up on the cross is the beginning of Jesus being lifted up in exaltation. It's ironic that the cross was a gruesome method of torture intended to humiliate the criminal and frighten the people into submission, but for Jesus, it's the exaltation of the Son of Man and salvation for us in the light of Christ.

D. L. Moody, the famous American preacher told the story of a passenger boat trying to make Cleveland harbor on a stormy night. The pilot knew he could find the harbor channel safely by keeping two lower shore lights aligned with the main beacon. But the lower lights had gone out. In the darkness, the pilot bravely tried to find the channel, but the boat crashed on the rocks, and many lives were lost.

Jesus is the light that has come into the world. Christians are like beacons of light who share the life-saving light of Christ to those who are lost and need guidance.

John 3:16 is like a snapshot of the whole New Testament. Maybe that's why it's so popular. It's a snapshot that summarizes the nature of God's love for us and it's the answer to the "Why?" of Jesus' life and death. There are four parts of John 3:16.

"For God so loved the world" is the motivation behind God's redemptive plan for the world: love. And God doesn't just love the world, God **so** loved the world. It's the love of a parent for their children and it's the reason for our salvation.

"That he gave his only Son" is the cost of our salvation. Freedom is never free. The cost of our salvation that takes away the sin of the world is hoisted upon a Roman cross.

"So that everyone who believes in him" is our one requirement. It's not our good works, but our belief in Jesus. We must transfer our trust in ourselves and in our own good works, to believe in Jesus and trust God. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in Ken's reading of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

And finally, "May not perish but may have eternal life" is the consequence of our belief in Jesus. What an amazing consequence! What an amazing promise of eternal life!

John doesn't use the noun faith – ever. Instead, John uses the verb believe, and emphasizes the dynamic action of believing. God gives Jesus to all people, but only *believers* actively accept the gift. God sent Jesus to save all people, but each person must believe in God's gift of salvation. God's love gives life to our action of believing.

Max Lucado tells about a young girl named Christina that he heard about from a Brazilian preacher. Christina lived in a simple one room home in a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of a small village in Brazil. Christina lived there with her mother Maria. Maria's husband had died when Christina was an infant. Maria struggled to provide for herself and Christina by working as a maid and at age 15, Christina was now old enough to help.

Christina was a very attractive child, and she was bored. She felt cheated out of the joys of life and she longed for the excitement of the big city of Rio. One morning, Maria found Christina's bed empty, and she knew immediately where her daughter had gone.

Maria knew the dangers of the big city, and what Christina would likely have to do to survive on the harsh streets of the city. Maria quickly threw some clothes in a bag, gathered up all of her money and headed for the bus station. On her way, she stopped at a drug store, went into the photo booth there and had as many pictures of herself made as she could afford. With her purse full of small black and white photos of herself, she boarded the next bus for Rio de Janeiro. Maria searched through bars, hotels, nightclubs, anywhere a vulnerable young girl might end up. And at each place, she left a snapshot of herself tacked on a bulletin board, taped to a bathroom mirror, or stuck in a phone booth. On the back of each picture, she wrote a short note. But Maria's pictures and money soon ran out and without finding Christina, Maria boarded the bus back home and she wept.

A few weeks later, young Christina slowly walked down the hotel stairs. She was worn down by the life she'd been living. She was tired and filled with pain and fear. Christina's adventure had become a nightmare and she longed for the safety and comfort of her simple home. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she looked over at the lobby mirror ... and then she looked again. For there on the mirror was a small black and white snapshot of her mother. Christina's throat tightened as she walked across the room and took the photo off the mirror. Written on the back were these words: "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home." And that's what she did.

In John 3:16, God has left us the same kind of snapshot for us to see the Light. It's a picture of God's love for us. It's a picture of Jesus lifted up and exalted on the cross for our salvation. And on that snapshot is a compelling invitation: "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home." We're called to actively believe in God's love for 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." Thanks be to God. Amen.