

Lent 2 – March 1, 2026

John 3:1-17

John 3:16

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA*



In light of our country's attack on Iran, I would like to begin this morning by reading a message from our Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe that was sent out yesterday:

Dear people of God in The Episcopal Church,

Here in the United States, we awoke this morning with alarm to the news that the United States and Israel have launched a large military strike on Iran. This violent attack comes despite weeks of negotiations that many of us had hoped would prevent armed conflict in this fragile region, which is home to so many religious traditions and faithful people.

Bishop Jeffrey Mello of Connecticut and a group of pilgrims from that diocese are in the Holy Land now, and when we spoke this morning, he let me know that they are safe at St. George's College in Jerusalem. I ask you to pray fervently for them and their safe return.

Pray, too, for all the people of the Holy Land, and especially for the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East and its leader, Archbishop Hosam Naoum. I had planned to be with Hosam today and tomorrow when he made a long-planned visit to our church. Many Episcopalians who had hoped to see him and assure him of our support will feel his absence keenly in the coming days. I commend to you the [letter that he has sent to the people of his diocese this morning](#).

As news reports tell us of fear and panic in Iran, I ask you to pray especially for the people of the Diocese of Iran and for all of the Iranian people. In recent weeks, we have mourned as the regime in Iran has killed peaceful protesters, and watched with alarm at both its increasing repression of the Iranian people and the escalating response of the U.S. government. As Christians who follow a Prince of Peace, we mourn that today's attacks will surely mean further hardship for the most vulnerable Iranians and, as retaliation inevitably follows, suffering that will spread across the entire region.

Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no strength known but the strength of love: So mightily spread abroad your Spirit, that all peoples may be gathered under the banner of the Prince of Peace, as children of one Father; to whom be dominion and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

This was yet another week when my sermon preparation was complete by the time I left church on Thursday afternoon. Earlier in the week, I had taken a deep dive into the story of Nicodemus. My research resulted in pages of notes that, for me, are like assembling a collection of ideas that will be winnowed down to serve as raw ingredients for the sermon message. After a time of reflection, the writing begins... always with multiple false starts. The hardest part of the process is not knowing where the writing will lead. For me, the sermon is never totally done, nor do I ever feel that it is totally satisfactory. As challenging as the process can be, my hope is that those of you who hear the message will receive some spiritual sustenance to help sustain you through your days and through the challenges we are experiencing at this moment in history.



When driving Route 19 between Port Townsend and Port Hadlock, when the weather is good, I often see a sad looking woman standing by the side of the road holding a cardboard sign that reads “Jesus.” When I spot the woman and her sign, I think a lot of different things. I think that she is passionate about her faith and wants others to be saved like her. I think that her sad look does not do much to convey her passion... it feels more like a sense of disappointment that others are not clamoring to accept Jesus, but that might be my own projection. From a marketing and communication perspective, I think that those who are speeding by and notice the sign saying “Jesus”... will have a variety of reactions on a spectrum that spans from, on one end, “Amen, sister!” to “I just don’t get it” ...or worse. And why would anyone expect someone who has no context for the word “Jesus” to understand who Jesus can be for them? The five-letter name “Jesus” is just a name until it is known within a larger story. More than that, a fuller meaning can only truly be known in relationship... and that is what Jesus offers a Pharisee named Nicodemus who... late one night, many, many years ago... wants to learn who this Jesus person is and what he is about. A simple sign saying “Jesus”, would not have done much to satisfy the curious Pharisee.

What, then, did Jesus offer Nicodemus? Essentially, Nicodemus comes to Jesus saying, “the scuttlebutt is that you are special, you turn water into wine and you are healing the sick... you must be from God... are you?” Using a contemporary language version of this biblical passage, Nicodemus’ opening statement is, “Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts that you do if God weren’t in on it.”¹ Jesus’ response was curious: “Unless a person is born from above, it is not possible to see what I’m pointing to – God’s kingdom.” “But how???” asks Nicodemus... “being born again makes no sense.” Befuddling is the word that comes to mind. Jesus tries again, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation – the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into new life – it is not possible to enter God’s kingdom.” It is not surprising that Nicodemus was left a bit confused and muddled. To understand the depths of what Jesus was saying means opening to awe, wonder, and mystery. It means feeling God’s presence in ways that cannot be measured by even the most sensitive scientific instruments. Jesus was emphasizing the deep mystery and grandeur of God’s realm. What Jesus was offering

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message//Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language*

was no small thing. Jesus was offering Nicodemus an entirely new life, a new beginning... a “fresh down to the foundations”² new beginning.

Near the end of today’s gospel lesson, we encounter the well-known words of John 3:16, “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.” The Reformer Martin Luther believed that John 3:16 is “Christianity in a nutshell.” This verse is often conveyed in shorthand by people who are “in the know.” **John 3:16.** But... those who are not familiar with the shorthand may be left confused. I have a beloved 96-year-old Lutheran/Episcopal friend whose license plate reads “Jn3:16.” Jean is a woman of strong faith and she delights in her relationship with Jesus. To Jean, her abbreviated license plate is like sweet music that she enjoys sharing with the world. To others, who wrestle with the meaning of Jesus and the meaning of his death... the shorthand may be especially challenging. This past week, I asked Etienna what comes to mind she hears the shorthand “John 3:16.” Etienna’s response was: John 3:17, of course! From the contemporary language version of the Bible, *The Message*, John 3:17 reads, “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.” Putting the world in right order again is, indeed, good news! Jesus came to heal, to reconcile, and through his life, teachings, death and resurrection, Jesus made all things new. Biblical commentator Debie Thomas reflects on John 3:16 this way:

“In just twenty-seven words, the verse describes a loving God, a cherished world, a self-giving Son, a universal invitation, a deliverance from death, and a promise of eternal life. Christianity in a nutshell, right?”

Thomas goes on to say,

*“Well, I’m not so sure. The problem is not in the verse itself, but in what the Church so often does with it. In our well-intentioned efforts to make the Gospel message sound accessible and palatable, we Christians sometimes reduce salvation to a soundbite.”*³

For those who don’t have a faith vocabulary... or who have not immersed themselves in the Christian faith story... the meaning behind the shorthand may be lost. Faith is not about a mere assent to a name or an idea. Faith is about relationship. It is also about our willingness to have our sure convictions turned upside down and inside out. It is such an upheaval that Jesus offered a Pharisee named Nicodemus. What Jesus offered was, “...not a tune-up, or a few minor tweaks... it was a brand *new* life. A new birth. A fresh, down to the foundations new beginning.”⁴ Thomas adds: “If we don’t find Christianity at least a little bit confusing, then perhaps its not Christianity we’re practicing.”

I think that St. Augustine said it well: “If you think you understand [God], it is not God.” We wrestle and struggle trying to understand who God is for us. We seek to find glimpses of God in the world around us... and, yes, we are stunned into silence by the beauty of a sunset, in visions of true liberation, in movements of peace... and, yes, we are, at times, wracked with questions and doubt about God’s very existence...

² Debie Thomas, “Where the Wind Blows,” *Journey with Jesus*, March 1, 2020. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2548-where-the-wind-blows>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

especially when wailing voices of grief and despair reach our ears... when we feel overwhelmed with the knowledge that incomprehensible acts of violence are happening in places far and near... knowledge that pierces our hearts... knowledge that causes us to ask “Why God? Where are you. Do something!”

In a 2013 “On Being”⁵ podcast interview with Krista Tippett, the biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman offered five stirring images of an awesome and mysterious God taken from the writings of Isaiah. Brueggeman declared that...

God is a “demolition squad.”

God is a safe place for poor people who have no other safe place.

God is the giver of the biggest dinner party you ever heard of.

God is the powerful sea monster who will swallow up death forever.

God is a gentle nursemaid who will wipe away every tear from every face...

It is for us to open our hearts and minds to the big story of God’s love for creation and of God’s call to a better way.

It is for us to be the hands and heart of God’s love in the world by feeding the hungry, comforting the afflicted, and offering a safe haven to those who are in danger.

It is for us to say YES! to God’s invitation to the biggest dinner party ever known.

It is for us to turn to our God who calls us out of death into life, out fear into joy, out of paralysis into loving action.

It is for us to know God’s comforting healing embrace that we may be a comfort to others.

May we, who hunger for God, prepare ourselves to expect the unexpected.

May we welcome the holy mystery that contains all love, all possibility,

and the vision of a better way.

May we drink deeply from living waters,

dedicate ourselves to God’s loving purpose

and show forth our praise by living the life

that God calls us to live.

Amen...

⁵ <http://www.onbeing.org/program/prophetic-imagination-walter-brueggemann/475>