

When Love Came to Town

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[0 : 00] The scripture for today comes from John chapter 3. Starting at verse 1, we read, Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do the signs that you do unless God is with him. Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Then at verse 13, we read, No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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. 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 did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

This is the word of God. Great. Thank you, Annabelle. And good morning, everybody. It is really great to be with you here this morning. And if you are new or you don't know me, my name is Kevin. I'm one of the leaders here. It's so wonderful to celebrate Christmas with you.

And especially if you are new with us, make yourself right at home. Be considered our honored guest this morning. We are really privileged that you have joined us. So thank you for joining us today.

It's wonderful to have you with us. History is full of big moments, isn't it? Think of some of the big moments, the invention of the wheel, invention of gunpowder, the invention of the printing press.

[2 : 09] History is full of big personalities. Think of Genghis Khan and Alexander the Great and Tang Tai Zong. But today we celebrate one of history's greatest moments, the coming of God to earth. Christmas, when God came to be with us. And we all know that Christmas is about all sorts of wonderful things. It's about joy, and it's about peace, and it's about hope. And what else?

It's about love. It's about love. That's right. It's about love, right? One of the best things about Christmas is getting to spend Christmas with loved ones, with those that are close to you, family or friends. Getting to spend Christmas Day and having meals with those people that are closest to you. Maybe you get to have some time off work, and you get to spend a bit more time with family. Maybe you get to travel afar and see family. Or maybe family come to travel to you. Maybe you're from out of town this morning, and you've come to Hong Kong to see parents or children or grandchildren.

So great to have you in the greatest city of the world. Welcome to Hong Kong. We are thrilled that you've joined us in this great city. But Christmas is really about loved ones, being together. It's about love. It's about loving one another and being loved in return. Of course, that also makes Christmas difficult sometimes. Sometimes you can't be with loved ones. Maybe you are a doctor, and you have to work through Christmas. You can't spend time with your family. Maybe you'd love to travel afar, but you can't get off work. Or maybe you remember a loved one that has passed away, and you miss them more so than usual at this time. Maybe for some of us, if we're honest, sometimes family can be difficult, right?

And so family get-togethers can be difficult. And we're reminded of the fact that we live in an imperfect world. A world that is made for love, but sometimes the world is not the way that it's meant to be.

[4 : 17] Well, the scripture that we looked at this morning is all about love. It's about God's great love for us. So let's look at it together. I'm going to keep this morning a little bit shorter than usual, but let's dive in. And if you have a Bible with you, we are looking at John's Gospel, chapter 3.

If you don't have a Bible, it should be in your bulletin, otherwise on the screen. But John's Gospel tells us, the story starts off with a man called Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a religious man. The Bible tells us he was a Pharisee, which means he's a very devoted man, a very devout man, a very well-studied man. He was a good Hong Konger. He was very educated. And he knew the scriptures.

He knew his tradition very well. He's a very devoted and devoted man, but there's something missing. There's something unsettling about his life. He comes to Jesus at night under the cover of darkness. He's coming. He's looking for something. He comes with a question. Now for Nicodemus, this is new to him. He's usually the man that answers the questions. People normally come to him with questions, but he's got a question on his heart. And so look what he does. He comes to Jesus and he says this. He starts off saying, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who's come from God because nobody can do the signs or the miracles that you do unless God is with him. Now, Nicodemus has noted. There's something distinctive about Jesus, something astonishing about him. And so he comes with this question. Now he doesn't get to his question, but this is his question. Jesus, who are you exactly? Who are you? What is your mission? Are you a friend or are you a foe? Are you an ally or are you an enemy? Jesus seems to do amazing things, but he also seems to stir the pot a little bit.

And Nicodemus is not sure. Can we trust you? Should we not trust you? Who are you? What's your mission? What's your message? Jesus typically doesn't always answer the question directly. He goes around the bush a little bit because he wants to get Nicodemus thinking and he wants to get us to think. So look at what Jesus says.

[6 : 32] He says, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot even see the kingdom of God. He cannot even see God. Okay. Jesus, what do you mean? Well, Jesus says to this spiritual seeker, this truth seeker, he says, you want to know the truth. You're looking for the truth. You're looking for God. You've studied the scriptures all your life. You're well averse with the sacred writings.

You're looking for God. But Nicodemus, there's a problem. You can't just hear truth. You can't just study truth in the books. You've got to experience it. You can't just know about God in your head. You've got to encounter God. You've got to experience God. You can't just go and sit in a church meeting, sit in the synagogue, listen to some great teacher. If you want to see God, you've got to encounter him. You've got to experience him. No one can see God unless he's born again.

A few weeks ago, this school where we meet, Ebenezer School for the Visually Impaired, every year Ebenezer has a big walk where we raise funds for the school. And so a bunch of us gathered downstairs, maybe about 500 of us or so, maybe a thousand, and we walk all around Pockfulum Reservoir and we come back again. But part of the experience is that part of it is you blindfolded. It's one thing to be told this is what it's like to be blind, but when you experience it, it's another story. And so you're walking around Pockfulum Reservoir and you've got to be blindfolded and you take somebody by the hand and hopefully they don't lead you into a ditch or into a tree or anything like that. The point is to experience it. It's not just, it's one thing to be told this is what it's like to not be able to see, but when you experience it, it's completely different. For those of you who are mothers here, I'm told, no one, it doesn't matter how much they try and explain to you, nobody will explain to a man what it's like to be in labor, right? You can be told all you want, but to experience it is another thing. Jesus looks at this man in the eye and he says, Nicodemus, in your head, you know almost everything there is to know about God. You know the sacred writings, you know the scriptures, you know the Jewish texts, but you haven't begun to know him until you encounter him, until you experience him. And Jesus' dramatic or phrase for this dramatic encounter is, you must be born again. You must be born again. He says, in your deepest, most fundamental part of yourself, in your deepest identity, your deepest self, you must come to experience who God is and come alive. It's one thing to know God in your head, it's one thing to know the writings, but in your deepest self, there's a part of your being that needs to come alive. Until that happens, you'll never know what God is like. You'll never discover the truth. You'll never know who God is and why he made you. Unless one is born again, you cannot see God. It's all just head knowledge, it's all just theory, until you encounter him. But there's a problem. In our English Bibles or our

[9 : 44] Chinese Bibles, it's a little bit vague to see, it's difficult to see, but the phrase that Jesus uses here, he actually uses a play on words. The Greek is the original language the Bible's written.

There's a play on words here. Because in the Greek language, the phrase born again purposefully can mean you're born again or born from above. Jesus says, spiritual seeker, truth seeker, unless you're born from above, you'll never know God, never encounter him, never experience him. That's a problem.

Because who is ever born from above? Who can ever go into the heavens and encounter God up there? Jesus is saying, if you want to know God, if you want to find truth, experience God, you've got to see God face to face. You've got to go and encounter him and experience him in the heavens. You've got to go find him. You can't just sit in a church meeting. You can't just go to the temple, to the monastery. You've got to see God face to face. Jesus tells us that true spiritual life, the joy and the peace and the hope that we long for, you can't just go to Ikea and buy them and wrap them up and put them under the Christmas tree. No, you've got to encounter the living God. But where are you going to find this God? He says, you must be born again. You must be born above. But how do you get above? How do you go up there? You know, maybe you want to experience what it's like to live in abject poverty. So you go to Africa, live in a mud hut for three months. Maybe you want to experience what it's like to live in a war zone, right? So you go to Israel or Ukraine or Gaza, go there. Maybe you want to experience what it's like to live in the freezing cold. So you book a trip to Antarctica, right? But how do you experience God? How do you get to heaven?

Anybody made plans for their summer holiday and you've got a travel agent. They say, I've got a special in Maldives. We've got a special in Australia. No, no specials on heaven this year. How are you going to get to heaven to find God, to experience him? You must be born of above.

[11:49] You must go and see God and let him change you inside. But how do you get there? It's a problem. Friends, Jesus shows us a real problem here because he says, you're a spiritual seeker, Nicodemus. You're a truth seeker. Well, I tell you, unless one is born from above, you cannot even see God. You cannot count to God. You're dead. And look at verse 13. He says, the problem is no one has ever ascended into heaven. Well, that's not very helpful. So Jesus tells us what we need, but then he doesn't tell us how to get there. No one has ever ascended into heaven. But look at the rest of verse 13. Friends, don't you see the good news of Christmas? The good news of Christmas is heaven has come down to us. Verse 13 says, no one has ever ascended into heaven except the one who has descended from heaven. Friends, the good news of Christmas is that you and I need to be born again. We need to be born from above. We need our hearts to be changed.

We need to encounter God. But how are we going to get there? Well, God has come to us. Emmanuel, God with us. And so where we couldn't get to him, God has come to us. That's the point of Christmas, that God himself has come, that we can know him and experience him and truly be born again and changed. This is what Christmas is about. Not just joy and peace and hope in a generic sense, the joy of knowing Christ, the peace of having your heart changed by the living God, the hope that is given as you walk with the real living God, the eternal God. God has come to us. But this passage, in this passage, Jesus tells us two more things. He tells us his purpose and his motive. He tells us what he came to do and he tells us why he came to do it. Look at what he says. Look at verse 14 with me. Jesus tells us his purpose. Verse 14, Jesus says, 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. Jesus here is referring to a story in the Old Testament. And it's a story where God's people were traveling through the wilderness. They were in the desert place for many, many years on the way to their kind of homeland. There were pilgrims and sojourners. They're traveling through the wilderness. But Israel kind of lost their way. They had rejected God. They wanted to do things their own way. They thought, we know what's best for ourselves. God, don't worry. We will handle things. And they got themselves into trouble. And they were constantly in trouble. And one of the problems was by turning away from God, in one of the experiences in the wilderness, there's this onslaught of snakes that come into the camp. And all sorts of people are getting bitten by these snakes. And people are dying. There's a plague of snakes that enter the camp. And it's really terrible.

People are dying. And so they come to Moses and they say, Moses, I guess we've been turning away from God. We've been rejecting God. Maybe this is the consequence. This is a curse that we are under for rejecting God. And Moses says this, I know what I'll do. Well, God tells Moses, why don't you make a bronze snake and lift it up high on a pole in the center of the camp? And if anybody's in trouble, if anybody's bitten or they're feeling sick, just look at the pole, look at the

snake. If anyone looks there as a kind of way of saying, God, I need you, as an act of faith, saying, God, I need you. I'm looking to your provision. Won't you have mercy on me? Won't you forgive me? They'll be healed. And so Moses makes this bronze kind of snake. He puts it up high on a pole in the middle of the camp. And Israel goes about life.

[15 : 44] And when somebody is sick, they're bitten, they look at the pole and they say, God, I need your mercy. God, forgive me. And they heal. Well, look at what Jesus says here. He says, just as Moses lifted up the bronze snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man, that's Jesus' name for himself, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

That whoever looks to him, whoever believes in him, will have eternal life. Who is the Son of Man? It's Jesus. Jesus tells Nicodemus here, the spiritual seeker, this truth seeker, he says, listen, I haven't come to do all the great signs and miracles that you're interested in.

I've really come to do one great sign, one great miracle. I, I will be lifted up on a wooden pole that whoever looks to me and trusts in me will be healed from the curse, healed from their sin and their shame and their suffering and their brokenness. Just like those people look to the snake on the pole, I will be lifted up on a wooden pole, on a cross. And anyone who is infected by sin and suffering and shame, if you look to me in faith, God will have mercy on you. Friends, why did Jesus come? Jesus didn't just come as a teacher. He didn't just come to dish out peace and joy and hope like candy. He came to die on the cross. He came to give us peace with God. He came to show us what God is like. Jesus came, we sang about it earlier, born to die, born to hang on the cross, born to take our sin and our shame and our suffering upon himself as our substitute that we may live. Jesus has come to heal us from the great spiritual curse, the disease of sin and rebellion that we may experience new life. And why did he do it?

Why? What was his motive? Well, again, he tells us, look at verse 16. He says, For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. Friends, why did Jesus come? Why did Jesus suffer on the cross? Because he loves us, because he loves you. For God so loved the world that he came and he sent his son.

Now, this verse tells us that it was God the father that loved the world, but the Bible tells us it wasn't just the father. It was the father and the son and the spirit. They were all united in this mission to love and rescue and save humanity. It was God's love for us that caused Jesus to come and die on the cross. And Shiloh read it to us earlier. Later on, John writes in one of his letters, he says, God is love. And this is love. Not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and sent his son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Jesus came to die, to be lifted up on the cross that whoever looks at him and says, God have mercy, will experience life. It was his love that held him there. Not the nails. The nails didn't hold Jesus. No, it was his love that held him to the cross. Now, friends, if you're familiar with Christianity or the church, maybe you've been to church many times, you're probably quite familiar with that verse. It is the most famous verse in the whole Bible. Martin Luther said, it's the whole

[19 : 17] Bible in one sentence. For God so loved the world that he sent his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but die. But don't let your familiarity with it dilute the wonder of it.

Who is this God? Well, Kristen spoke to us about it earlier. Friends, and I call to worship this morning, we pondered the expanse of the universe. The millions and millions and millions of light years of expansiveness. The billions of stars and galaxies and star-forming galaxies. The expansiveness of the mind-blowing expansiveness of our universe. And if you think about it, within our solar system, our little planet is so infinitely small, it's almost non-existent. I mean, our planet is so tiny within our solar system. And our solar system is so tiny in the entire universe. I mean, it's, friends, if you think about it, our planet, planet Earth, we're actually nothing, really. I mean, in the grand scheme of things, what are we? We're nothing, really. I mean, we are like a grain of sand buried five meters deep on some obscure beach that nobody really cares about, right? So we really are nothing. And within our planet, there are eight billion of us, plus a previous, let's say, eight billion.

I mean, who are you and I really? Our lives don't really matter that much, do we? Except to him they do. Friends, they matter enough for Jesus Christ, the one who spoke space and time and matter into existence.

This divine being whom we call God that brought all of this expansiveness into existence, we matter to him. For God so loved you and me that he sent his only son to die on the cross that we might know him. This uncreated being sent his son for us. Now, you may say, well, of course God loves

me. Why wouldn't he love me? I mean, come on. I'm pretty lovable, aren't I?

Okay, maybe. But my guess is for most of us, that's probably not our temptation. Most of us, the thoughts that go in our heart is, why would God ever love me? The things that I've done that I shouldn't have, the things I haven't done that I should have done, why would anybody, created or uncreated, why would anybody love me? Friends, the Bible tells us that because God is love, his love is not dependent on how lovely or lovable you are. It's a love that simply flows out of who he is. God's love for us is not based upon what he sees inside of you, but it's based on what's found inside of him. It's a steadfast love that never ends and never changes. God loves us because of who he is. As we come to a close in, let me tell you a story. In 2018, the story always moves me. In 2018, there was a police officer in the U.S. She had worked all night, a long shift all night. Her name was Amber Geiger. And so she returns home to her apartment the next morning, exhausted. And her apartment is a walk-up. There's no lift. And she walks up to her apartment. She's exhausted. She's not really concentrating. She takes one flight of stairs too few. And so she exits the flight of stairs in the wrong level. And she turns right to her apartment, what she thinks is her apartment, but she's on the wrong floor, and she's one floor too low. She turns and she sees what she thinks is her apartment. The door is open and there's a stranger inside. So she thinks there's a intruder inside that's broken in. She assumes that he's armed and dangerous and so she takes out her police revolver and she shoots the man dead. 26-year-old Botham Jean dies in his own apartment because of a mistake that Amber Geiger makes. Well, unsurprisingly, she is convicted of murder. But at her sentencing, the victim's brother, his name is Brant Jean, gets to speak and share the impact that her actions have had on the family. But Brant Jean, along with his brother Botham, who died, are both followers of Jesus. They are worship leaders in their church. They're committed Christians. They've encountered the love of Christ. And so listen what Brant Jean says at the sentencing of Amber Geiger to her. I think it's on the screen.

[24 : 12] He says, this is, after he says this, he asks the judge if he can get down and give her a hug. He says, I don't want to say for the 100th time what you've taken from us. I think you already know that.

But what I want you to know is that I forgive you and I love you. I love you just like anybody else. I do not hope that you rot and die like my brother did. I personally, I want the best for you. Then he says, I wasn't going to say this in front of my family, but I don't even think that you should go to jail. I want the best for you because I know that's what my brother Botham would want for you. Then he says to her again, I love you. Friends, this is a remarkable love that somebody could have for somebody that took a loved one from them. And throughout history, we hear stories of people that somehow miraculously were able to find the love for those that had hurt them, those that had harmed them. I think of Elizabeth Elliot going and loving the very tribesman that had slaughtered her husband. Friends, the Bible says that the love that the Lord Jesus Christ has for us is far more profound than even this because it says, when we were God's enemies, when all we had given God was a fist and pushed him away in the middle finger, when we were God's enemies and said, God, we don't want you. God so loved us that he sent his son to die on the cross for us. The Bible says that maybe somebody will die for a good person, an honorable person, but for the enemies, who would die for their enemies?

God so loved us that when we were his enemies, Jesus Christ went to the cross for us. Dear friends, it is true that no one has ever ascended into heaven, but there is one who has descended from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God. For just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so would Jesus Christ be lifted up on the cross. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever would look to him, trust in him, believe in him, will not perish, but have eternal life. This is why Jesus came. This is the story of Christmas. This is the hope of what we celebrate today. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, it turns out that Christmas is about love after all.

Not just loving others like our family and our neighbors, the poor and the marginalized in our city. Not just being loved or spoiled by loved ones. No, Lord Jesus, Christmas is about your profound love for us. The steadfast, unyielding, redeeming love of God for a lost and broken world.

[26 : 59] Jesus, thank you for coming to us. When we could not come to you, when we could never find our way to you, you came to us. Heaven has come to us. Emmanuel, God with us. But not just coming to be with us, coming to die and suffer for us. That we might know you. That we might be born in you. Born from above.

God, we're so grateful. We love you. We celebrate you. We thank you for the wonder of Christmas.
In your great name we pray. Amen. Amen.