

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan**  
**“Living John 3:16”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, March 8, 2020**

**Genesis 12:1-4**

*Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’*

*So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.*

**John 3:1-17**

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?*

*‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.*

*‘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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your spirit. Pray that you would take the words, the worries, the joys, that each of us carry within us, the words we've offered in song and in prayer and heard from scripture, and take the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. By your spirit, transform all of these words into your word for us. May your word live within us and rise up and strengthen us and encourage us, comfort us and challenge us. May it do whatever it needs to do in order for us to be a little more faithful, a little more loving, a little more gracious, all of this in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

So I came to Bible study this week on Thursday night in the chapel, kind of licking my chops a bit because the passage for today includes the famous John 3:16 passage. And I realize that for myself, John 3:16 reminds me of T-ball because what I want to do is put John 3:16 up on the stand and take a bat and hit it as hard as I can to see how far I can make it go away. It's so famous that we don't even hear it. We don't understand it. We don't let it do the work that it needs to do. And especially, because it's so bright and shiny, we don't see anything that's around it.

And so, again, I came to Thursday night, thinking, "Oh, this is going to be great" because we can look all around John 3:16 and not get fixated on it or stuck there. And my starting point was John 3:17 because John 3:16 is held up so often as-- well, if you only believe in Jesus, you'd have eternal life. I believe in Jesus; I have eternal life. We forget or don't hear or don't read the next verse which says that God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. The shiny object seems to point towards exclusive faith in Jesus as something that is given to those special ones. And the next verse says that God's love through the Son is for all of creation, in order that all of creation might be made whole or

saved or restored through him. So in that moment of that tendency, whatever, to sort say it's all about my faith, all of a sudden we realize that God is doing something in the world that goes beyond our simple constraints of faith.

And then on Thursday, as is our practice, I read the text, slowly stopping various places, and everyone else speaks whatever catches their attention, or ask a question, or-- we sort of have this running conversation. When I came to the part where Jesus is responding at the end after Nicodemus says, "How can these things be?" when I began reading that next part, something struck me. In Verse 10, it says, "Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel and yet, you do not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you did not receive our testimony.'" When I read that out loud, it struck me that all of the sudden, the tense changed from first person to second person-- "I tell you," "We speak of--" so all of the sudden, Jesus who's having a conversation with Nicodemus seems to portray that something else is going on. And I thought Thursday that maybe this section of Scripture had been lifted from somewhere else and stuck in here by the author of John's Gospel. We talked quite a bit about that on Thursday night. But what I've realized over the weekend is that maybe there's a different explanation for why Jesus switches from "I" language to "we," or plural language, why he switches from exclusivity of the one to an inclusive sense of an "us." And when you think about Jesus and how he lived his life and you think about Nicodemus coming to him as it says, "In the night," we don't know if that's after dinner night, if that's at 2:00 A.M. night. But I've always thought that it's so dark. It's just the two of them talking. But I realize that maybe it's earlier than that. And Jesus is there with his disciples. Nicodemus comes to Jesus. The disciples are there. They overhear the conversation. And Jesus simply turns to the disciples when responding to Nicodemus and says, "We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony." Maybe it's not two people talking. But Jesus, as witnessed in other aspects of the Gospels, is with the disciples and others. And they're all present to experience this conversation.

This idea really came home to me yesterday as I went to a park in Chesterfield to plan a memorial service. Earlier in the week on Thursday, I gathered with the siblings, the children of Wilma Kercher who passed away last week. One of the siblings lives here. One of them lives in St. Charles, but vacations in Florida. One has a residence in Colorado, and one lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan. As I was talking to them on Thursday, it dawned on me that the four of them had not had an opportunity to spend a lot of time together. In fact, two of them had just shown up earlier that morning. So as I listen to all of the conversation and the ideas, what came to me was, "You all need to go and bake for a while." All the ingredients are there. But the stew needs to simmer a bit. And so I said, "Let's get together in a couple days and kind of see what happens." They had this family gathering planned out at this park. And the idea was born that I would come 30 minutes before that. And the five of us would get a chance to talk. So I showed up. We began to talk. And about five minutes later, their extended family started to show up. I watched as food piled up on a table. Hugs and kisses and tears started to flow. stories started to be shared, and the group of people just kept growing and growing and growing. And what dawned on me on Saturday in a park in Chesterfield was that we, the power of the group was so much more significant than the power of an individual. And that what they were doing is what Jesus talks about in verse 11. They were sharing testimony to what they know, to what they believe. They were telling stories about it, and I wondered where had I seen this idea about the gospel of John and testimony because somewhere in the back of my head there was some alarm going off saying, you've read a book about that or you did something. And I looked it up and it was professor Richard Bauckham who teaches at Cambridge. He wrote several books. Two of them are *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, and the other is *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. In both of these. He is arguing that the testimony of the disciples is the most significant aspect of their faith and their lives in understanding and appreciating Jesus.

So I being the nerd that I am, went to my Bible study program and I searched in the gospel of John and I looked up how many times does the gospel talk about testimony or testify? 30 times in John? To give you some reference, it names the word love 30 times, light 23 times, life 47, and faith zero. So in the gospel of John testimony or testify is an important aspect, as important, if you will, as love or light or any of the other themes that are introduced by the writer. And so I went and look where are those themes? And here are just two examples, not from the gospel, but from other books in the Bible that are attributed to John. The first is in the first chapter of 1 John, the very first words. We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning the word of life, the life that was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it and declare to you the eternal life that was with the father and was revealed to us. We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you may also have fellowship with us. And truly, our fellowship is with the father and with his son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

So in the very first words of 1 John, the author lifts up this idea of testimony, of sharing what you have heard, what you have seen, what you've looked at, what you've touched. And then in the very last words of the Bible in revelation, the very last part, Jesus says, It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with his testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of

David, the bright morning star. And then later the one who testifies to these things says, Surely, I am coming soon. And the author writes, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen." So throughout the corpus of John's writings, this idea of testimony is lifted up again and again and again. And where this is all leading is to the question about John 3:16-- that whoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life. Because I know a lot of people when they're asked to sort of provide an explanation for their faith turn to John 3:16-- "Well, why do you believe in God?" "Well, because God sent his only son so that whoever believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life." "Okay, but why do you believe that?" "Well, because that's my faith. That's what I hold in my heart. That's true." And there's sort of this circle of questioning and affirmation of faith, and sometimes, it doesn't go anywhere. But what I think the gospel is inviting us to consider - and really, the entire corpus of John's writings in the Bible - is that we need to tell our stories. Rather than saying, "Jesus died for your sins," when asked the question of, "Why do you believe in God?" Or, "How do you know God exists?" We need to do better. We need to share stories because stories have the power to convey that which faith statement can't or a Bible verse can't. And so, I've been imagining the last couple days-- how would I answer a question if posed to me-- "How do you know and believe that God-- that there is a God and that God has anything to do with you or me?" And thankfully, as a minister, I never get asked that question [laughter]. Everyone just assumes there's a ready answer, but I've been thinking and I've been working on it. So I'm going to try it out on you. And I'm trying it out on you to invite you to think about what story might you be able to share if someone ever asked you, "How do you know there's a God?"

My story would begin here. Actually, it would begin up in my office, talking to Bill about a new pipe organ several years ago. In that conversation, we talked about needing an instrument. We talked about forming a committee, the process that we needed to go through, and who would be on the committee. We picked Judy Roberts to be co-chair because she loved music and the church. We picked Alan Ritter to be the other co-chair because he loves music, sings in the choir, and is a technological wizard. We added in George Durnell and several other people that love music, and as the list kept growing on my whiteboard, I started to get nervous because I wanted someone who could say, "No," to all those people who would probably say, "Yes." I wanted someone who was of good character who wasn't afraid of big-dollar numbers in the millions. I wanted someone who could analyze this from a distance and have the courage and strength to tell us, "No, we can't do it." And the person that immediately jumped to my mind was Neil Ewing. Neil said yes and served on the committee. We go through the process. We get this lovely organ. Everything's going great. We have a party at Neil and Margie's house to celebrate the good work the first weekend that it's played, and I invite my dear friend Bruce, a pastor from Sarasota, to come and be with us that weekend. He's here in church. He goes with us to the party, and he and Neil hit it off because both of them love really fine scotch [laughter]. Neil breaks out the special bottle that Bruce, the connoisseur of scotch, had never even heard of, and the two of them just clicked.

A couple of years later, I go to Florida to visit Bruce. Neil and Margie invite us over. We go and sit by their pool. We sip on some fine adult liquid from Scotland, and we just talk. And then, a couple of years later, I get a phone call from Margie, terrified that Neil is being rushed into surgery. Long story short, she called back 10 minutes later, and he had lost his life. After praying with her and talking and crying, I hung up the phone. And thankfully, my wife, Jani, was sitting on the couch, and she looked at me, and we were chatting. And I had this sudden urge to get on a plane and to go to Naples, Florida, to be with Margie at this unbelievably hard time. And as I sat with that, Bruce's face just showed up. And the idea was born that I should call him and see if he could go. So not 10 minutes later from the conversation with Margie, I was on the phone with Bruce saying, "Hey, this is what happened." And before I could even ask him, "Could you go?" He said, "Do you want me to go? I can go now." And he went, and he prayed with her and provided the kind of care that I would want her to have in that moment. If you stand back and look at that story, there is no logical reason on earth that Bruce Wismer should know Neil Ewing or Margie. And yet, because of all these weird connections in her moment of greatest need, my friend could be there, providing pastoral care for her. If someone were to ask me, "Do you believe in God?" I wouldn't say yes. I'd tell that story again. Amen.