

LENT TWO YEAR A, MARCH 1, 2026

John 3:16 may be the most famous verse in the Bible. You have seen it glowing on stadium screens. Printed on billboards. Pressed into coffee mugs. Stitched into pillows. Martin Luther called it “the heart of the Bible, the Gospel in miniature.”

Twenty-seven words. And yet... sometimes what is most familiar becomes invisible. Sometimes what is repeated most often is heard least deeply.

So let us slow down. Let the words breathe again. Because the danger is not in John 3:16. The danger is in what we have done with it. We have shrunk it. We have domesticated it. We have taken a cosmic declaration and turned it into a slogan small enough to fit on a bumper sticker.

But these words were never meant to be shouted through a megaphone. They were spoken in the dark. A quiet conversation. Between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. A religious leader. A man certain of what he knew.

And Jesus begins to unravel him. “Born from above.” “Spirit and water.” “The wind blows where it chooses.” Nicodemus does not understand. He cannot follow. He is disoriented.

And Jesus does not rush to tidy it up. He does not reduce mystery into bullet points. He does not offer a theological diagram. He lets the wind blow. Perhaps we need to feel that wind again. Because we have often done the opposite. We have turned John 3:16 into a line in the sand. Believe the right thing—or else.

But listen. “For God so loved...” So loved. Not tolerated. Not evaluated. Not conditionally approved. Loved. “The world.” Not the worthy. Not the morally impressive. Not the theologically precise. The world.

The Greek word is *cosmos*. Creation in its entirety. Broken systems. Violent empires. Corrupt institutions. Hard hearts. Fearful disciples. God so loves all of it. All of it.

And somewhere along the way we began to wield this verse like a weapon instead of receiving it as a wonder. We made belief into a test. An intellectual hurdle. As if salvation were a multiple-choice exam and heaven were the prize for circling the correct answer. But when Jesus spoke of belief, he was not demanding a checklist.

In her book *Christianity After Religion*, Diana Butler Bass reminds us that the English word “believe” comes from an old German word meaning “to hold dear, to love.” To believe is to be-love. Not to hold an opinion. But to treasure. To entrust. To give your heart without reservation.

The biblical word carries this sense of trust, fidelity, surrender. Belief is not about winning arguments. It is about giving your heart away. Nicodemus did not leave that night with a tidy creed. He left confused. And maybe that was the beginning of his faith. Because faith often begins in holy disorientation. Jesus did not offer him a tune-up. He offered him a death and a birth. A tearing down. A rebuilding. A beginning again so complete it felt like starting over from scratch.

That is not cosmetic religion. That is new birth. And new birth is disruptive. It strips away certainty. It exposes pride. It dismantles systems built on fear and control. The Spirit blows where it chooses. You cannot cage it inside denominations. You cannot confine it to politics. You cannot reduce it to formulas. If our faith never unsettles us...If it never undoes us...If it never calls us to repent of the ways we have confused control with conviction...Then perhaps it is not the Spirit we are following, but our own reflection.

And then there is the verse we glide past too quickly: “For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world...” Not to condemn. How easily we forget. How easily the church has been quicker to condemn than to love. Quicker to exclude than to embrace. Quicker to define who is out than to embody mercy.

Jesus did not come to sharpen dividing lines. He came to cross them. He did not come to secure tribal boundaries. He came to lay down his life for the cosmos—the whole tangled, aching world.

Belief, then, is not a passcode into heaven. It is the courageous act of stepping into that love. It is trusting God enough to step into the light—even when the light exposes us. It is surrendering our addiction to being right so that we may learn how to be loving.

Because it is far easier to defend doctrine than to practice love. Far easier to argue theology than to forgive an enemy. Far easier to quote John 3:16 than to live John 3:17.

But Jesus did not come to make us correct. He came to make us new. And new people build new communities. Communities marked not by fear of judgment but by audacious mercy. Communities that reflect a God whose love cannot be reduced to a formula, packaged into a slogan, or contained inside our narrow definitions.

So breathe these words again. “For God so loved the world...” Let them move through you slowly. Let them undo you gently. Let them widen your heart.

John 3:16 is beautiful. Cherish it. Memorize it. Proclaim it. But do not shrink it. Because the love it proclaims is vast enough to disturb you, deep enough to humble you, and strong enough to save the world. And that love will never fit on a billboard. Amen.