

## For God So Loved the World

2/7 of Series 3:16

John 3: 1-21 (1-3; 16)

08-09-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

<b>DVD</b> <i>Be My Valentine, Charlie Brown</i>	Begin: 16:02 “Let’s see . . . .”
	End: 17:26 Throws box out the window.

### Introduction

Our “back-to-school” worship series is simply entitled **3:16**. The series is based on a book by Max Lucado: 3:16 The Numbers of Hope. The book explores each phrase of John 3:16. This verse is one of the best known and most loved passages of the Bible. In the introduction, Lucado writes: *“If you know nothing of the Bible, start here. If you know everything in the Bible, return here.”* (8)

I encourage you to engrave this verse on your mind and heart. One goal of the series is to insure that children, youth, and adults have all committed John 3:16 to memory. Let’s recite it together: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* (NIV)

Last week we looked at the larger context of John 3 that recounts Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus. Today we turn our attention to the first phrase of the verse: **“For God so loved the world.”**

### I. For God

**“For God . . . .”** By definition, all theology begins and ends with God. During college, I majored in history. Historians study religion as a discrete part of a culture like its ethnicity, agriculture, and government. However, religion is intricately intertwined in all that is human. The history of humanity IS religious history. Since the dawn of time, men and women have instinctively worshipped a power greater than themselves. This common yearning links people of every time and place.

Genesis 1:1 begins with the simple statement: *“In the beginning, GOD . . . .”* God’s existence is an unquestioned given. Before the foundation of the world, GOD IS. Scientists study the what, when, and how of creation. We declare the WHO of creation.

In the Biblical stories, we discover that God is a self-revealing Lord seeking **covenant** or relationship with His people. In the Old Testament, God forms a series of covenants with the patriarchs and matriarchs of the faith and eventually with the entire nation of Israel. The Jewish people formed a monotheistic faith that dared to declare: *“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is ONE. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

Evidence of God’s existence abounds. **Creation** itself testifies to the handiwork of the Creator. Psalm 19: 1 affirms: *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”* Earlier the psalmist wrote: *“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.”*

(Psalm 8: 3-5) We are “*fearfully and wonderfully made.*” From a cellular to a cosmic level, God’s fingerprints are found all over creation.

I recently read an intriguing book entitled Is God a Mathematician? by Mario Livio. My initial thought was, “Dear Lord, I hope not!” And that IS a prayer! Livio asks the question whether mathematics was invented or discovered. An intriguing thought is that math is part of God’s grand design that holds the universe together. The book looked at the universal “language” of mathematics and the surprising order found in arithmetic, algebra, and geometry. Math and science help us to discover the wonderful, intricate details of God’s creation.

Humanity was originally created in the *image of God*. Even on the far side of the fall, sinful humans still intuitively sense God’s presence and power. Paul wrote to the church in Rome: “*For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*” (Romans 1: 20)

However, external evidence is not enough. Facts can only lead us so far. To borrow a phrase from Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, we must make a “*leap of faith*” that affirms God’s presence in our lives.

## II. So Loved

“*For God so loved . . .*” Based upon the external evidence of creation and the internal sense of the divine, most people recognize God’s existence. God IS; but God is WHAT? God is \_\_\_\_\_--fill in the blank. Many images and titles color our divine portrait. Ultimately we are attempting to describe the indescribable.

Several months ago, Brian played a prelude entitled *The Lord God Ineffable*. I don’t know about you, but “ineffable” is not a word I use much in daily conversation—actually, I don’t know that I had ever even heard the term before. So I looked it up. “Ineffable” means unutterable, indescribable, indefinable, and unspeakable. “The Lord God Ineffable” is an apt description of the Almighty. How does one begin to describe God? At best, we catch glimpses of the divine character and nature. As Paul puts it, “*we see through a dark glass dimly.*”

So we resort to the language of **poetry**. Similes and metaphors compare and contrast God to more familiar realities. Rich and diverse images describe our encounters with the eternal. God is:

- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer
- Savior, Master, and Lord
- Rock, Fortress, and Deliverer
- The Good Shepherd, the Great Physician
- The Fairest of Ten Thousand, the Bright and Morning Star
- The Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End

No single snapshot captures the panoramic picture. Each image gives hints, clues and insights into God’s nature. Recall Moses’ encounter with the divine at the burning

bush. When Moses asked God's name, the Lord declared: *"I am who I am."* In other words, God IS.

Perhaps the most concise and incisive image of God comes from John's letters to the New Testament Church. 1 John 4:16 concisely yet eloquently declares: **"God is love."** These three single syllable words come closer to the mark that volumes of theology. However, this seemingly simple statement is also infinitely complex. The trouble rests not in John's description of God but our definition of love.

The word **"love"** is like a worn dollar bill left in circulation too long. It suffers so much from overuse that it has almost lost all meaning. Max Lucado wrote: *"Love. We've all but worn out the word. This morning I used love to describe my feelings towards my wife and toward peanut butter. Far from identical emotions . . . Overuse has defused the word, leaving it with the punch of a butterfly wing."* (p. 34)

In a book entitled The Problem of Pain, **C. S. Lewis** observed that when we speak of love, "most of us mean kindness—the desire to see others than the self happy; not happy in this way or in that, but just happy. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, 'What does it matter so long as they are contented?' We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who as they say, 'liked to see young people enjoying themselves,' and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, 'a good time was had by all.'

Not many people, I admit, would formulate a theology in precisely those terms; but a conception not very different lurks at the back of many minds. I do not claim to be an exception: I should very much like to live in a universe that was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear that I don't and since I have reason to believe, nevertheless, that God is Love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction." (p. 40)

After years of observation, I have determined that many parents make a common mistake of simply wanting to make their **children happy**. Now hear me clearly—all of us would like for our children to be happy, but this is NOT the chief aim of parenthood. Christian fathers and mothers are charged with raising up children in the faith. Our goal is for them to become the Godly men and women that the Lord created them to be. Hopefully, happiness will be a byproduct of this process. However, sometimes the best thing a parent can do is to make sure their children are very UNhappy about some of their actions and the subsequent consequences.

In a similar way, God's love is not a sappy sentiment that simply wants folk to be happy. It is a stern, all demanding love that wants the absolute best for the beloved—and will settle for nothing less. It is a costly love—for God so loved the world that he gave his Son. It is a costly love—for God will settle for nothing less than ALL of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Moses told the people of Israel: *"The Lord chose your ancestors as objects of his love."* (Deuteronomy 10:15, NLT) In the original Hebrew, the verse literally says: *"The Lord binds (hasaq) himself to his people."* The verb describes a *"tethered love, a love attached to something or someone."* (Lucado, p. 35)

Have you ever seen one of those **leashes** made for children? You know what I'm talking about—a harness straps around a child's torso and attaches to a leash held by a parent. I always thought those devices were demeaning and inhumane. After all, a toddler is not a terrier. THEN we had children! Now we never actually used a child-leash, but I was sorely tempted on several occasions.

Lucado notes: "*The strap serves two functions, yanking and claiming. You yank your kid out of trouble and in doing so proclaim, 'Yes, he is as wild as a banshee. But he's mine.'*" (Lucado, p. 35)

God is love. The Lord tethers and binds himself to us. It is a love that accepts us as is but won't allow us to stay that way. It is a wonderful, terrible love that will settle for nothing less than our absolute best.

### **III. The World**

"*For God so loved the world . . .*" The Bible talks about the world in general but we can fill in the blank with each of our names and faces. For God so loves YOU and ME. If you grew up in church, then you've heard this truth since you were old enough to sing, *Jesus Loves Me, This I Know*.

But pause a moment today and meditate upon this outrageous statement. The Lord God Almighty, Creator of the Heavens and Earth, loves YOU. He who spoke creation into being and gave the uncountable number of stars their names, loves YOU. The one who laid out the master plan for life, designing DNA, RNA, mitochondria, proteins, enzymes, and each to play their part in the dance of life loves YOU. The Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End who existed before time and will exist after time loves YOU.

Such love is beyond all imagination. The height, width, and depth of God's love expand beyond our comprehension.

Dee Dee tells the story of taking her daughter out to Lake Hartwell for a day of fun on the water. Suddenly it hit the girl just how large the lake really was. She turned to her grandfather and said, "This lake is REALLY big!" And her grandfather replied, "And that's just the top of it!"

We have only dabbled our toes in the water and walked the shores of God's oceanic love. There are soundless fathoms of love and grace with depths beyond all human comprehension. For God SO loved the world.

Such news is overwhelming; and part of the reason we find it so difficult to believe and understand is deep in our hearts we don't feel terribly **lovable** oftentimes. At our worst moments, we may well not be!

In the animated TV special, *Be My Valentine, Charlie Brown*, **Charlie Brown** is anticipating Valentine's Day. He constantly checks the mailbox for red and pink envelopes. He debates whether he will need one or two briefcases to carry all of his Valentines home from school. Of course, you know what happens—the round-headed kid with the thorn-pattern shirt does not receive a single Valentine. Charlie Brown is heart-broken, feeling unloved and unlovable.

There's a bit of Charlie Brown in each of us. Most of us attempt to put up a good front so that others will care for us. But what if the people around us knew us to the depths of our soul? And knew not only what we have done and said but also all the thoughts that have ever gone through our mind? I doubt a single relationship would remain. But the one who knows us first and knows us best loves us first and loves us best.

### **Conclusion**

In Pixar's animated film, *Toy Story 2*, Woody the toy cowboy is afraid that his boy named Andy no longer loves him. By mistake, Woody is placed into a Yard Sale Box and sold. An unscrupulous toy collector buys him. Then Woody finds out he is the missing piece of a very valuable collector's set of toys. In a climatic scene in the movie, Woody must choose between becoming a valuable part of a museum exhibit or remaining a child's used but loved plaything.

<b>DVD</b>	<b><i>TOY STORY 2</i></b>	<b>Begin: 1:05:00</b>	<b>"Woody, you are not a . . . ."</b>
		<b>End: 1:07:35</b>	<b>"Buzz, I'm coming with you!"</b>

The turning point for Woody came when he rubbed the fresh paint off the bottom of his boot and saw Andy's name printed on his sole. The reminder of who he belonged to reminded him of who he was.

God's name is printed upon each of our souls. Our identity and worth is determined not by WHOM we are but by WHOSE we are. The Lord God Almighty, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, has declared that we are lovable and loved. Who are we to argue?

Max Lucado wrote: *"God loves you with an unearthly love. You can't win it by being winsome. You can't lose it by being a loser. But you can be blind enough to resist it."* (40) God's love note in John 3:16 reminds us *"For God so loved the world."* Hear the good news: you ARE loved by the God who IS love. Amen.