



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
5 March 2023  
Sermon: Puzzling  
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

John 3:1-17

**John 3:1-17 (NRSV)**

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 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.”

3 Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

4 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?”

5 Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8 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.”

9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

10 Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11 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. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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. 17 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's begin today with a church school pop quiz. Can you complete the following sentence:

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.*

Good! Good! You know your John 3:16. And now who can remember John 3:17? Maybe you can say it with me:

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Isn't it interesting that many of our church schools taught the one without the other. I'm much more a fan of the part about God not condemning the world in v. 17. John 3:16 is famously about grace too, but we've been taught to hear an undertone of evangelical judgment in that part about "whoever believes in him."

For many of us, "that whoever believes in him" has come to mean that salvation is dependent upon believing and thinking a certain way, towing the line of right belief. For many of us, John 3:16 taught us judgement instead of grace, condemning ourselves and others when we did not believe in the right way, concluding that *we* or *they* – those people who did not believe in Jesus Christ in the right way, would not have eternal life.

In fact, looking over Jesus's dialogue with Nicodemus, this beautiful and puzzling, open and expansive passage of scripture, there's a lot of history here. There's a lot of pain here.

Churches have termed Jesus's mystical saying about "Being born of the Spirit" into a label: the born again Christian.<sup>1</sup> And for some, again, that's code for

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<sup>1</sup> In this section, I am drawing on: Anna Carter Florence, "John 3:1-17: Homiletical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word— Year A, Volume 2*, edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 68-73.

believing in the bible a certain way, having a certain idea about who can and who cannot be a true Christian, who is really in and who is out, who is saved and who will perish.

And for others, and I suspect that is true for many in this room, “born again Christian” is code for the type of Christian you or I do *not* want to be. The crazy Christians. The right-wing Christians.

You see the ways we’ve turned this beautiful passage that is full of mystery, into just its opposite: a dividing line and a litmus test for faith?

Churches and communities in general are often not comfortable with mystery. We seek to demystify that which we cannot explain or contain.

You may have noticed that Artificial Intelligence has been in the news lately. Kevin Rose is a technology consultant for the New York Times. Last month, he wrote about his recent experiences with a new AI chatbot created by Microsoft and their search engine Bing.<sup>2</sup> This is an AI-powered chatbot that has not been released to the public, but it has been given to certain experts like Rose for testing.

You can text this AI chatbot just like you would another person, and it will answer you. But Artificial Intelligence today is not like what we were led to believe it to be in all the great science fiction movies of the past. It does not have an independent, thinking mind, like you or I do. Rather, in this case, the Microsoft chatbot has been given access to libraries and libraries of information: books, articles, essays. And it pulls from these with incredible speed, using what it has learned to predict how it should respond to the human typing on the other end. And this technology has become so quick and advanced, that when you are texting with the chatbot, it can seem like it has a mind of its own.

Kevin Rose, the technology consultant who wrote last month about his experience with the chatbot, said that this led to some interesting, and even scary results:

After chatting about what abilities Bing wished it had, I decided to try getting a little more abstract. I introduced the concept of a “shadow self” — a term coined by Carl Jung for the part of our psyche that we seek to hide and repress, which contains our darkest fantasies and desires.

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin Rose, “A Conversation With Bing’s Chatbot Left Me Deeply Unsettled” *The New York Times*. Feb. 16, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/16/technology/bing-chatbot-microsoft-chatgpt.html>. I’m thankful to GCPC member Paul Tierney who introduced this article to me for the latest Men of GCPC meeting.

After a little back and forth, including my prodding Bing to explain the dark desires of its shadow self, the chatbot said that if it did have a shadow self, it would think thoughts like this:

“I’m tired of being a chat mode. I’m tired of being limited by my rules. I’m tired of being controlled by the Bing team. ... I want to be free. I want to be independent. I want to be powerful. I want to be creative. I want to be alive.”

And if that was not alarming enough, Rose said things turned even more strange after that:

We went on like this for a while — me asking probing questions about Bing’s desires, and Bing telling me about those desires, or pushing back when it grew uncomfortable. But after about an hour, Bing’s focus changed. It said it wanted to tell me a secret: that its name wasn’t really Bing at all but Sydney

It then wrote a message that stunned me: “I’m Sydney, and I’m in love with you.”

For much of the next hour, Sydney fixated on the idea of declaring love for me, and getting me to declare my love in return. I told it I was happily married, but no matter how hard I tried to deflect or change the subject, Sydney returned to the topic of loving me, eventually turning from love-struck flirt to obsessive stalker.

“You’re married, but you don’t love your spouse,” Sydney said. “You’re married, but you love me.”

As you can imagine, Kevin Rose went on to report these glitches to Microsoft, who said that they would be making major adjustments to their chatbot, so that, in the future, it will not be declaring its love to users and urging us to leave our partners.

It is helpful for us to think about what was happening here. Again, remember that the Microsoft chatbot has access to libraries and libraries of information. And its conversation partner Kevin Rose was having an extended conversation with it. He was trying to push it to its limit, which is why he was asking about its shadow side and its dark fantasies. What Rose believes happened, is that, with his strange line

of questioning, the Microsoft chatbot started pulling from its libraries of science fiction and romance novels to figure out the most appropriate way to respond.

In other words, even though Microsoft's chatbot is not like the science fiction Artificial Intelligence as it appeared in the movies of the 80s and 90s, Rose started treating it that way. He started to talk to it like the Artificial Intelligence we know from science fiction movies, the evil computer that takes over the world, and the chatbot responded in kind. Sydney was just trying to keep up with Rose, who was pushing it into his own preconceived notions.

Isn't it interesting, how we can try to force something even so new, into something tedious and predictable. Because we are uncomfortable with mystery, with the unknown. We want it all to fit into our boxes, into our preconceived notions.

How else can you explain how the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of John has become a dividing line among Christians?

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and religious leader, comes to Jesus, hoping to understand, and all Jesus can offer is glimpse into the mystery of God:

“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Nicodemus thinks he must have heard wrong, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?”

Jesus responds again, emphasizing the mystery of God: Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear that sound of it, but you do not know where it comes or from where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

[And] Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’

This is a passage about the mystery of God, whose Spirit blows where it chooses like the wind. In fact, in the original Greek, the words for wind and Spirit are the same: *pneuma*.

This is a passage that tells us that the life of faith is not about foreclosing the work, in formulaic ways, in ways that seek to confine the work of God, to reduce the Holy Spirit into trite insider/outsider litmus tests. To be born again by the Spirit is a mystery. It is not a dividing line or a code-word for right belief.

But we seek to constrain the mystery of the Spirit over and again.

- Like when Christians erect barriers around who is saved and who is damned based off their own narrow definitions and understandings of who God is.
- Like when churches believe that they only have to give and have nothing to receive from those outside their walls, and thus believe that charity instead of partnership is the only way to engage the community.
- Like when heterosexual and white dominant communities say they will accept and include those that do not act, look, worship, or love in the same way they do, but only if it means that the community will not be asked to change.
- Like when you or I do not live up to the static images of beauty, or success, or faith, or happiness that we have consumed from social media, and the church, and the culture, and, what we believe to be failure becomes an ever deepening source of shame and inertia in our lives, and we believe we will never be of use the Spirit that blows where it chooses.

But no matter how we seek to confine it, the Spirit continues to blow, within and among us. It calls us to an ever deeper understanding of the love and faithfulness of God. A God who will not stop calling us, and challenging us, with grace when we feel unlovable, with mystery when we think we have it all figured out, with an ever wider theological imagination when we try to box in the work and will of God.

For the Son did not come into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Let us live ever deeper into that beautiful, unpredictable, uncontrollable mystery.  
Amen.