



Sermon Thoughts for Christmas Eve

Some Sermon Thoughts on John 3:16

Why John 3:16?

Pastors may wonder why John 3:16 would be chosen to serve as the theme for a Christmas outreach effort such as C19. After all, it is not exactly a traditional Christmas text. However, there are aspects of this text that lend themselves well to a Christmas message, especially a message aimed (at least in part) at worship visitors. Consider also the presence of some members who rarely attend worship.

First, it is almost certainly the best-known verse in the entire Bible (with the possible exception of Genesis 1:1 and Psalm 23). If an unchurched person is going to know a Bible verse, it will likely be this one. So, there is a fair chance that the pastor is beginning with his listeners' "known" and can take them to their "unknown."

Second, the text emphasizes God's love for the world. This is important because the most common objection to religion in general and Christianity, in particular, is: "How can a loving God allow so much suffering?" In other words, many unchurched people simply do not believe that God *does* love the world. They believe that either a) "There is no God because if there was this world would be a much better place" or b) "If there is a God, he is not loving. So, I don't want anything to do with him." When asked in an interview whether he believes there is a God, Geddy Lee (lead singer of the band *Rush*) is reported to have replied, "Well, if there is, he isn't doing a very good job." This text states, in no uncertain terms, that God *does* love the world. What's more, this text explains how we can know this is true.

Third, the text emphasizes God's love for *the world*. If God loves the whole world, it means he loves every person in the world—the individual. Whether they admit it or not, unchurched people are carrying a heart-load of guilt. Their conscience is constantly accusing and insisting that "God could not love someone like you." Or, they look at their life circumstances and conclude that God does not love them. Needless to say, church members are also dealing with the guilt of their sins and are, at times, tempted to doubt God's love for them.

For these reasons, John 3:16 provides a wonderful platform on which to build a Christmas message that will bless both members and visitors alike.

It will be up to the preacher to determine the length of the message appropriate to his setting. Some may choose to share a typical 15–20-minute sermon. Others may decide it is wise to prepare something shorter, perhaps 10 minutes, due either to congregational culture or in recognition that with more lessons than usual (assuming the use of one of the C19 *Lessons and*

Carols services), the people in the pews will already be listening to a fair amount of the spoken word. Regardless of the length of his message, the preacher may want to consider some or all of the following thoughts with his listeners.¹ These thoughts are neither a text study nor a fully formed sermon. They are, rather, ideas drawn from our text that we hope might be helpful to the preacher as he develops his message.

Introduction

Given what was shared earlier about many people's doubts concerning God's love, one might begin the sermon by demonstrating why it can be difficult to *see* that God loves this world. Recent tragedies (whether natural disasters or sin-caused pain and suffering) could be referenced. The preacher then might move to the individual listener's life and say something like, "Sometimes events in our own lives can cause us to wonder about God's love. Illness or injury, loss of a job or loss of a loved one—there are plenty of problems in our lives that might make us wonder, 'Does God really love this world? Does God really love *me*?' It can look like God has abandoned this world. It can seem that he has abandoned you. It can seem that he doesn't care. Nothing could be further from the truth. What we are celebrating this evening proves it. And what Jesus says to us in John 3 promises it.

Sermon Body

"Listen again, 'For God so loved the world...' And isn't it shocking that he does? Have you looked at this world lately? It's a mess! Hate and hurt and abuse, lying and cheating and stealing, jealousy and arrogance and injustice are everywhere. And God loved *this*?

"Yes,' says Jesus. 'God loved the world.' That includes *you*! Can you believe it? You! Who could love someone with so much to feel guilty about from their past? Who could love someone with so much to feel guilty about in the present? Who could love someone who has done *those* kinds of things? Who could love someone who has *those* kinds of thoughts? Who? The God of this universe, that's who. You may feel that no one loves you, that no one cares about you. You may even feel that they are right – that you are unlovable. But Jesus assures you tonight that, even if it seems that no one else loves you, God does.

"But...how can you be sure? People say, 'I love you,' all the time. Talk is cheap. Just because someone *says* they love you does not guarantee that they do. So, how can you be sure? How can you be certain that God loves you?

"You can be sure because of what he gave you. 'God so loved the world that he gave...' Gave what? What did God give? A new car? A cabin on the lake? A million dollars?

"...he gave his one and only Son...' If you had ten sons, you wouldn't give one of them to save another person. Imagine that your child was in the hospital recovering from an illness. A doctor comes into the room and tells you that there is a child a few rooms down who is dying.

¹ Some of the thoughts shared here are taken from Professor Daniel Deutschlander's sermon preached at the 2005 WELS National Worship Conference. The preacher is strongly encouraged to listen to this fine sermon. It can be accessed [here](#). It's a gem not only for its content but also for its delivery.

But that child will live *if* you are willing to give her your child's heart. It will mean, of course, that your child will die. But the other child will live. Who would agree to such a thing? Who would be willing to make such a sacrifice?

“Your God would. Your God did. He gave his one and only Son. That is what tonight is all about. That little baby in the manger is God's gift to you, to the world. That little baby—wrapped not in paper but in swaddling clothes, that little baby—placed not under a tree but in a manger, that little baby is the greatest gift you will ever be given. No matter what you unwrap later tonight or tomorrow morning, it will not compare. Because that little baby did for you what no one else, least of all you, could do. He restored your relationship with God. He willingly went from lying in that manger to hanging on a cross where he paid the penalty your sins and mine deserve. The baby whose birth we are here to celebrate took our place and paid our price so that God is now able to say, ‘I forgive you. I no longer hold your sins against you.’”

“Can you believe it? Jesus says you can. In fact, Jesus says, ‘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.*’ Eternal life! What could be better? What could be better than knowing that, when you leave this life, God will welcome you into his heaven, that you will spend forever in a place without the pain and suffering and sadness and sickness of this place?”

Conclusion

One option for concluding the sermon would be to say something like: “Finally, that is what this night is all about. We are here to celebrate a birth two thousand years ago that promises us a life that will go on for endless thousands of years. All because God so loved the world. All because God so loved you.”

Here is another option: “For many people, Christmas is a favorite time of year—a time of calm and peace and comfort. But, before long, it has passed, and we are back to our busy lives. Before long, we are back to the realities of this world with all of its stress and sadness and sin. And, if Christmas was nothing more than parties and presents, it would have nothing to offer when we return to the realities of this world. But tonight, we have been assured that Christmas is much more than parties and presents. Christmas is proof that God loves the world. It is proof that God loves *you*. Remember this when times are tough, and you are tempted to wonder whether God cares. He does. That baby in the manger says so. And that means you can have a very Merry Christmas all year long.”

P.S.

If you use the hymn response option “Love Cause Your Incarnation,” consider how you might heighten appreciation for both the text and the pairing with the tune for “O Sacred Head” by comments in the sermon.