

This morning I'd like to take what's probably the most famous verse in the Bible and show you how it's thankfully an edgy Christmas verse about Jesus visiting a bad part of town. The most famous verse in the Bible, we heard it in today's NT reading, John 3:16: *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life.*

Today is the first Sunday in Christmas and the Sixth Day of Christmas.

Now, the usual Christmas stories from Matthew and Luke are mostly told from the viewpoint **down here**, the viewpoint of **Zechariah & Elizabeth** and their miracle baby **John**; and then **Mary & Joseph** and their super-duper miracle baby **Jesus**.

And we hear about the **shepherds** and **wise men** and jealous **King Herod**, all folks down here.

John 3:16 is Christmas from more of a heavenly perspective, not us **receiving** the gift of God's Son but God the Father **sending** his son.

John 3:16: *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.*

When we hear the words, "God so loved the world," we might think of something like this, the famous Apollo 8 picture of the earth rising over the moon, taken 50 years ago last week. Seeing the whole earth like that, so small and beautiful and precious and fragile, an island of life in the mist of the darkness of space and the desolation of the moon, it was actually the **first time** in general human consciousness that we thought of ourselves this way.

Earth and all its peoples, a beautiful **blue marble**, a tiny, precious **jewel** in the blackness of space.

And I suppose when we hear, "God so loved the world" we likely think of God seeing us as **beautiful** and **precious** and **small** and **fragile**, and loving us, kind of like how we look at an **infant** child, so tiny and helpless, and feel love and care.

"God so loved the world"

Well, I have some bad news for you.

Throughout this book, John the Evangelist never uses the word "**world**" (Greek *kosmos*) to mean something good and beautiful and innocent and valuable.

Rather, he mostly uses "world" in a quite negative sense. For John, the world is:

A place of unbelief:

1:10 The Word was in the world. And the world was made through him. But the world did not recognize him.

A place that needs saving:

1:29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

A place of wrong desires and values:

1 John 2:16-16 For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. [spiritual / moral darkness]

A place of darkness

8:12 When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Where the haters are:

15:18 "My disciples, does the world hate you? Remember that it hated me first. [what if nations had a "Gross Hatred Index" like their GDPs?]

A place of false peace and joy:

14:27 I leave my peace with you. I give my peace to you. I do not give it to you as the world does. Do not let your hearts be troubled. And do not be afraid.

A place of troubles:

16:33 “I have told you these things, so that you can have peace because of me. In this world you will have trouble. But be encouraged! I have won the battle over the world.”

A place ruled by the Devil:

16:11 The world is guilty as far as judgment is concerned. That’s because the devil, the prince of this world, has already been judged.

So when John says, “God so loved the *world*” he’s saying, “God so loved that dark, hateful, deceptive, trouble-filled place of wrong values and spiritual enemies of God.

God loved THAT world so much he was willing to send his most precious thing, his only begotten child, to . . . to THAT place!

It wasn’t God the Father sending Jesus on a business trip, with some decent hotels and maybe a little sightseeing on the side..

It certainly wasn’t God the Father sending Jesus on a vacation

It was God the Father sending Jesus to a very bad part of town, a dirty and dangerous part of town.

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.

By the way, this is the way the world is no matters who is in the **White House**. Of course presidents and policies matter, but we humans even at our very best still absolutely need saving.

Enterprise was the 2001-2006 fifth Star Trek series, and set before the original series, so before Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock.

In *Enterprise*, the humans and Vulcans have just met and don’t really know each other very well or trust each other yet. And so the first Vulcan to serve on a human ship becomes T’Pol.

So this is long before Mr. Spock, this is the first time the humans and Vulcans have tried serving together on an extended basis.

So one day the Vulcan T’Pol is reporting back to the Vulcan Elders and they have this bit of dialog:

ELDER: How long have you lived on the Earth ship?

T’POL: Nine weeks and four days.

ELDER: The smell must be intolerable.

T’POL: You get used to it, and I was given a nasal numbing agent.

Haha! The first things Vulcans found out about humans is, compared to Vulcans, humans **stink!** This is the **FIRST THING** these Vulcans talk about after spending time with humans. “The smell! Can you believe it?!?”

God so loved the world –the smelly human world--that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life.

What if each of us always SMELLED the way our souls were at any given time—if we were hateful we’d really stink, if we were coveting it would be P-U, etc. What would the world be like?

There’s a line I love in the musical *West Side Story*.

It’s a scene where these two rival gangs have been behaving badly once again.

And, Doc, the kindly drugstore owner, who cares for both the Jets and the Sharks, is just cut to the heart that all the hate has led to yet more tragedy.

So he points at these young men, these gang bangers, who are part of all this hate and violence, and he says:

DOC

What does it take to get through to you? When do you stop? You make this world lousy!

ACTION

That’s the way we found it, Doc.

These gang kids didn't make the world lousy, they found it that way..
Actually in the Movie, Doc says "You make this world lousy!" and Action replies, "We didn't make it." But same idea.

And you know what, when the Son of God obeyed his Fathers command to come to this earth and to be born that first Christmas Day, how did he find this world?
He found it LOUSY, full of violence and hatreds and suffering and hurts and hunger and sickness and death.

God so loved the world --this LOUSY world --that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life.

Here at New Hope one of the big reasons we choose to be in this neighborhood is we choose to be in a place that is not very insulated from the human condition.

Presently we have one of the city's largest homeless encampments just a block away, so that all the societal and family and personal and community failures that have led to the present homelessness crisis is right here.

But it's a place already loved by God.

But the truth of the matter is: it doesn't matter what part of this world you live in, whether it's in a muddy homeless encampment a block from here or in the nicest part of Piedmont three miles from here.

Spiritually speaking, every neighborhood is just as smelly, just as needy, just as dark, just as much in need of saving—and just as loved.

*God so loved the world --the whole world --that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life. **Anyone—poor or rich, educated or uneducated, young or old, documented or undocumented, majority culture or a minority culture, God loved everyone and gave his Son as an offer of hope for everyone***

And of course this darkness, and selfishness, and anger are not just out there and in whatever neighborhood you live in; that **darkness is right here too**, in each of us, in my heart and yours.

Inside me is a bad, dangerous neighborhood too.

You need a New Year's Resolution? Here's one: "**Don't be yourself. Be someone a little nicer.**" But after you've tried that and reached the end of yourself, look for Jesus and let his love into your life.

Today we are celebrating Christmas but you know how the story goes. What happened to Jesus in that bad neighborhood?

You know exactly what happened: the worst thing: the bad neighborhood got him killed.

But God, who loves us so much, has the power to turn something so bad into something infinitely good: he raised Jesus from the dead so that through Jesus we can have hope no matter what kind of neighborhood we are in or what kind of neighborhood our hearts are today
And when God call us to spend time in places and with people we may not like, whether they smell good or bad, anywhere and everywhere we go is somewhere pre-loved by God and for whom he sent Jesus.

God so loved this neighborhood right here, and the neighborhood that is your home and your heart—that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life.

Christmas Blessings everyone!