

“KNOWING JESUS: I - SAVIOR”
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Today is a new beginning. It's a new beginning because every year at this time, on the Sunday after Labor Day, another year of ministries kicks off - ministries like Sunday School, youth group, Bible studies, music ministries. It's an exciting time when people return from time off in the summer and vacations here and there.

But there's something else new this fall, something you probably wouldn't notice unless I pointed it out to you. Every year since I came here in January of 2000, I have preached from the lectionary. The lectionary is a prescribed set of scripture readings for every Sunday of the year, out of which I would pick one upon which to preach. I preached the lectionary almost every Sunday except for the Sundays of Advent and Lent, when I would tend to preach sermon series.

Well, for various and sundry reasons, I decided to do something different this year, which is why I say today is a new beginning. This year, I won't be preaching exclusively from the lectionary. This year, the Spirit nudged me into preaching a series of sermon series. So from now, until next June or so, I'll be preaching six different sermon series.

As I sat down to plan it all out, I asked God to lead me in selecting the themes for these series, and very soon, it began clear to me that I needed to begin at the beginning, which is to say, the first series needed to be about the person of Jesus Christ. After all, our church's vision and mission is to be a place where people come to “know Jesus, be known by Jesus, and make Him known to others.”

So that's where we're going to begin - with a four week sermon series called “Knowing Jesus.” And clearly, the best known and most loved passage of scripture about Jesus is this - that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish but have everlasting life.”

So that's where we're starting this year, and this morning. Knowing Jesus as Savior. We'll do that by way of a story of a man who was lost - and his name was Nicodemus. Now, he wasn't lost, like wandering the streets with nowhere to go. No, he had a home, he had a church, if you will, a temple. He had a family and friends. He had a career, he was a professional religious man, a Pharisee. From all outward appearances, one would never know that Nicodemus was lost.

But you see, he did. He knew it deep down in his soul. He knew something wasn't right, something was missing. He had a great deal of knowledge in his head,

and had you stopped Nicodemus on the street and asked him a question about holy scripture, he could have quoted you the exact scripture and verse and expounded very well upon its meaning. He knew religion really, really well. What he didn't know was faith.

And so he went looking for it, under cover of night, because God forbid, one of the other Pharisees would see him. What would that look like? Nicodemus was afraid of being discovered - what if someone saw him and realized that he was unsure of himself, and was searching?

So off he went in the darkness and his journey took him to Jesus, who answered his questions and offered him life - new life, full life, meaningful life, forgiven life, eternal life. Jesus saved him - literally.

At a time when Nicodemus was so afraid of being seen as a fraud, Jesus treated him as a beloved child of God. At a time when Nicodemus was afraid someone would discover the real him, a human being fraught with sin, Jesus did see him and loved him anyway. At a time when Nicodemus was lost, Jesus not only showed him the way, but Jesus was the way, the truth and the life. Jesus saved him - literally.

If you have come to this place today seeking to know Jesus - then know what Nicodemus found out - that Jesus is, first and best of all, Savior. He is the only begotten Son of God whom God sent into this world in human form, to live like us, and suffer like us, and be tempted like us, and die like us. He is the One who bore our sins on a cruel cross, and who burst forth from the prison of death to live again, that we too, might live again after we draw our last breath. He is the One who sets us free from the grip of sin, and sets us on the path to start over again. He is, first and best of all, our Savior.

The prolific writer Max Lucado, has written a book based on this scripture passage, and it's entitled *3:16, The Numbers of Hope*, which I highly recommend you read. In that book, he says this: John 3:16 is "a twenty-six word parade of hope: beginning with God, ending with life, and urging us to do the same." (p. 8)

He also says that the verse is "an alphabet of grace. 'God so loved the world . . .' We'd expect (he continues) an anger-fueled God. One who punishes the world, recycles the world, forsakes the world . . . but loves the world?" (p. 9)

Indeed, it is astounding to consider that in this world filled with lost people, all of us in that number, by the way - sinners in need of grace, that God loved instead of punished, God reached out instead of rejected, God built a bridge instead of cutting us off - and sent Jesus our Savior to rescue and redeem us.

Early in his book, Lucado tells of a man named Bill Tucker, who had a powerful experience in his teen years. Bill was around 16 years old when his father got really sick and had to quit work. The family struggled for a while, and even after his father recovered, they still struggled to make ends meet.

Mr. Tucker, Bill's dad, had to figure a way out. And blessedly, he came up with an idea. He heard about an opportunity for someone to reupholster all the seats in the town's movie theatre, which would be a big job and financially rewarding. Now, he had no idea how to do it or the equipment with which to do it, but never one to say die, Mr. Tucker found someone to teach him the necessary skills and he scraped together just enough money to buy an industrial strength sewing machine. The whole family put all their resources together, including taking every last penny out of their savings account to buy it.

Well, once they had the money, Mr. Tucker and young Bill went off in the family's pick-up truck to get the machine. Bill remembers, even now, that it was a jovial, hour-long trip, and he and his dad were filled with optimism and hope about this new beginning for the family. Things were finally looking up and they could feel it! They got to their destination, handed over the money, and together hoisted the sewing machine into the back of the truck, right up against the back window and secured it down.

Then, as they were preparing to take off, Mr. Tucker handed Bill the keys and told him he could drive. Well, being a teenage boy, no one needed to ask him twice. So Bill got behind the wheel, started up the truck, and away they went, on the way back home.

Listened to what happened next, in Bill's words:

"As we were driving along, we were excited, and I, like any other 16 year old driver, was probably not paying enough attention to my speed. Just as we were turning on the cloverleaf to get on the expressway, I will never, ever forget watching that sewing machine, which was already top heavy, begin to tip. I slammed on the brakes, but it was too late. I saw it go over the side. I jumped out and ran around the back of the truck. As I rounded the corner, I saw our hope and our dream lying on its side in pieces. And then I saw my dad just looking. All of his risk and all of his endeavor and all of his struggling and all of his dream, all of his hope to take care of his family was lying there, shattered."

"You know what comes next, don't you? (Bill continues). 'Stupid, punk kid driving too fast, not paying attention, ruined the family by taking away our livelihood.' But that's not what my dad said. He looked right at me. 'Oh Bill, I am so sorry.' And he walked over, put his arms around me, and said, 'Son, this is going to be okay.'" (p. 21)

How many times must God look at us, at the mess we make of our lives, at the ways we turn away from Him, at the times we are so very lost, and have every right in the world to be disgusted with us, or punish us, or turn away from us, yet instead, through the gift of His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, God instead puts his arms around us and says, "It's going to be okay. You are forgiven. You are saved. You are safe."

If today, this day of new beginnings, finds you lost, or hurting, or alone, or filled with sin and despair, fear not - for help is near at hand - and His name is Jesus, our Savior. He died to set you free, He died that you might find your way to the Father, He died to save you. And He lives to walk with you into new life this very day, if you will but take His hand and give Him your heart. May it be so.

Amen.