The God Who Sends: Light, Love, and Mission in John 3:16-21

Missional • Three-Point Sermon

John 3:16-21 • Mixed congregation

Introduction: More Than a Bumper Sticker

Most of us learned John 3:16 before we could tie our shoes. It shows up on stadium signs, coffee mugs, and refrigerator magnets. But when a verse gets that familiar, it risks becoming a slogan — something we recite without really reading. So this morning I want to put John 3:16 back where it belongs: inside a story.

The setting is a rooftop conversation in the middle of the night. Nicodemus — a Pharisee, a teacher of Israel, a man with everything to lose — comes to Jesus under cover of darkness. He is curious, but afraid. He has questions he cannot ask in public. And into that midnight meeting, Jesus speaks what may be the most compressed summary of the missio Dei — the mission of God — ever recorded.

'For God so loved the world.' Stop right there. Not the religious. Not the already-convinced. The world — the kosmos — the whole broken, beautiful, complicated creation that God made, that went sideways, and that God refuses to abandon. This is not a verse about individual rescue only. This is God's mission statement for the cosmos. And by the time we reach verse 21, we discover it is also our sending orders.

This morning we are going to move through this passage in three movements — the three questions every missional community must answer: What is God doing? Where do we fit? And how do we go? Each answer draws us deeper into the light that Jesus says has come into the world. Each answer is, in the end, a commissioning.

John 3:16-21, John 1:14

> **Illustration: Nicodemus and the Midnight Question**
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> The detail that Nicodemus comes 'at night' is not incidental for John. Throughout this Gospel, darkness and light are not just physical realities — they are spiritual postures. Nicodemus represents everyone who has been near the truth long enough to be curious but has not yet stepped fully into the light. By the end of John's Gospel, this same Nicodemus stands publicly at the cross (John 19:39), claiming the body of Jesus at great personal risk. Something happened between that midnight conversation and that public act of courage. That transformation — from darkness to light, from curious to commissioned — is the arc of every sent life.
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> *Source: John 19:38-42; narrative context of the Fourth Gospel*

Point 1 — The Sending God: What God Is Already Doing

Before there is any word about what we should do, the passage arrests us with what God has already done. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.' This is the missio Dei — the mission of God — and it is the non-negotiable foundation of everything that follows.

Lesslie Newbigin, one of the great missionary theologians of the twentieth century, spent decades reminding the church that mission does not originate with us. It originates in the very nature of the Triune God — a God who is, by nature, a sending God. The Father sends the Son. The Son, by his Spirit, sends the church. Mission is not a program the church runs; it is the heartbeat of the God we

worship. The missio Dei precedes the church. It even precedes creation.

Notice the verb at the center of verse 16: 'he gave.' He sent. The Greek verb for 'sent' used elsewhere in this Gospel — apostellM — is the root of our word apostle, meaning a sent one. Jesus is the original sent one. The incarnation — God becoming flesh and pitching his tent among us — is not simply a doctrine we affirm at Christmas. It is the paradigm for all mission. God does not manage the world from a safe distance. God enters the neighborhood. The Word becomes contextual, embodied, present.

And what does God love? The kosmos. The whole world. Tim Keller has observed that the gospel is not merely a rescue operation to evacuate souls from a burning world. It is the announcement that the world itself will be renewed — that God's comprehensive salvation encompasses broken systems and broken hearts alike. The scope of God's love is as wide as creation, and God's mission is nothing less than the restoration of shalom — the wholeness, flourishing, and right-relatedness that marked creation before the fall.

The already and not yet tension lives right here in verses 17-18. Jesus did not come to condemn the world but to save it — and yet that salvation is not yet fully realized. We live between the decisive victory of the cross and the final consummation of all things. This inaugurated eschatology is not a problem to be anxious about; it is the engine of mission. Because the kingdom of God is already breaking in, our work matters. Because it has not yet fully come, we hold our efforts with humility and hope.

Practical anchor: Before we ever ask what we should do, we must sit with what God is already doing. The sending God is at work in your neighborhood, your city, your workplace — before you arrive, before you speak, before you plan. Mission does not begin when we show up. The Spirit goes before us. Our first missional practice is not strategy. It is discernment: learning to see where God is already at work so we can join it.

John 3:16-17, John 1:14, Colossians 1:19-20

Illustration: The Missionary Before the Missionaries

David Bosch, in his landmark work 'Transforming Mission,' recounts how early missionaries in Africa would arrive in a village expecting to introduce God to a people who had never heard of him — only to discover that the people already had language for a creator God, already had longings that mapped onto the gospel, already had questions that only the story of Jesus could answer. The Spirit had arrived first. The missionaries were not bringing God to the people; they were joining what God was already doing. This pattern — God ahead of us, Spirit preceding us — is not the exception in mission. It is the rule. It shapes the posture with which every sent person enters every cultural space: not as a savior bearing light to total darkness, but as a witness pointing to the light already breaking in.

Source: David Bosch, Transforming Mission (1991); missional anthropology and common grace

Point 2 — The Sent People: Where the Church Fits in God's Story

The narrative pivot in verses 18 through 21 is stark and clarifying: light has come into the world. The question the passage raises is not whether the light is real — it is. The question is what we do with it, and where it goes.

Here is what missional theology presses us to notice: where does light go? Not into a building where people must come and find it. Light enters darkness. Light goes where the darkness is. It shines. It moves. It illuminates everything in its path.

Ed Stetzer writes that the church is most faithfully itself not when it is pulling people toward a central location but when it is scattering as sent people into every corner of culture. We do not go to church; we are the church, dispersed into every neighborhood, workplace, school, and third place as agents of the kingdom of God. The gathered community is essential — we need to rehearse together who we are and whose we are — but gathering is in service of scattering. Every Sunday morning is a sending ceremony.

This is the theological shape of the church's identity that Darrell Guder and others in the Gospel and Our Culture Network articulated so clearly: the church is a sign, an instrument, and a foretaste of the kingdom of God. As a sign, we point beyond ourselves to the coming kingdom. As an instrument, we work alongside God for the healing and restoration of the world — pursuing shalom in practical, embodied ways. As a foretaste, we give the neighborhood a glimpse of what human community looks like when the kingdom breaks in: reconciled across division, generous with the poor, honest about failure, joyful in hope.

Verses 19 through 21 give us one of the most important principles in missional theology: people are not uniformly hostile to the gospel. 'Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light.' Discernment — the practice of learning to see where the Spirit is already at work, where people are already moving toward light and truth — is a core missional practice. We do not approach every culture as total darkness. We approach every person as someone who bears the imago Dei, in whom God's Spirit may already be stirring.

Reggie McNeal describes the shift from the church as a destination to the church as a sending station. The old mental model: build something impressive enough that the community comes to you. The missional model: every member is an ambassador, every home is a mission outpost, the scattered church is not the church at rest — it is the church at work. This is not a strategy for growth. It is faithfulness to our identity as a sent people, a missional community living as a faithful presence in the places God has planted us.

John 3:18-21, Matthew 5:14-16, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

Illustration: The School as Mission Field

A pastor in Austin noticed that nearly half his congregation had children in the same elementary school. Rather than planning a church event designed to attract the school community to the building, he gathered those families and asked a different question: 'What if we were simply faithful presence at that school?' Over the next year, church families showed up consistently — volunteering in classrooms, attending PTA meetings, hosting block parties for the neighborhood. They weren't running an outreach program. They were being the church where they already were. Within two years, the school had become the deepest point of incarnational presence that congregation had ever experienced. Several families came to faith not because they were invited to a service but because they watched people live with unusual generosity and grace in an ordinary place.

Source: Case study in incarnational presence; consistent with Ed Stetzer's Subversive Kingdom principles

Point 3 — Going as Light: The Practice of Faithful Presence

Verse 21 gives us the practical posture of the sent life: 'Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.' We live our way into the truth before we talk our way into it. Incarnational presence precedes and informs proclamation.

Alan Hirsch and the broader missional community have given us language for this: gospel fluency is the practice of learning to speak naturally about the gospel in the language of everyday life — not

theological jargon dropped awkwardly into conversations, but the developed capacity to connect the deep longings and real questions of ordinary life to the story of what the sending God is doing in the world. Gospel fluency is not a sales technique. It is a way of being present — attentive, honest, and articulate about hope.

Cultural engagement, in the missional sense, means we take our cultural moment seriously. We do not retreat from culture or simply condemn it from a distance. We enter it with discernment — looking for what the Gospel and Culture Network calls 'points of contact': places where every culture contains echoes of the imago Dei, longings that point toward shalom, questions that only the story of Jesus can fully answer. We are not imposing a foreign religion on our neighbors. We are helping them see what their own deepest longings were always pointing toward.

Here are three concrete, contextual practices for the sent people drawn from this passage:

First: map your third places. Coffee shops, gyms, school bleachers, neighborhood parks, community centers — the places where people already gather naturally and where you already have organic presence. These are not venues for planned evangelism. They are the spaces of neighboring where the kingdom of God shows up through consistent, unhurried, genuine presence. Identify two or three, and commit to faithful presence in them.

Second: practice the art of neighboring. Not strategic neighboring designed to manufacture conversion opportunities, but genuine neighboring — learning people's names, their histories, their losses, their hopes. Faithful presence means showing up consistently enough that people begin to ask, 'Why do you live this way?' That question is the door through which gospel fluency walks.

Third: tell your part of the story. Not a rehearsed presentation. Not a theological argument. The honest, contextual, first-person account of someone who has been encountered by the light and is still learning to walk in it. 'This is what I have seen. This is what has changed. This is what I am joining.' That is gospel fluency in its most natural form — witness rather than sales pitch, testimony rather than technique.

The light of John 3:16-21 is not a passive light. It does not wait in a building for darkness to come to it. It shines. It moves. It enters the darkest corners of ordinary life with the confidence of those who know where the light came from and where it is going.

John 3:21, Matthew 5:14-16, Acts 1:8, 1 Peter 3:15

Illustration: Light Does Not Wait

In physics, light does not negotiate with darkness. It does not wait for darkness to agree to be illuminated. It simply shines, and where it shines, darkness retreats — not because darkness has been argued out of existence but because light is more powerful. The early church understood itself this way: not a community defending a fortress against a dark culture, but a dispersed, incarnational people carrying the light of the kingdom into every space they inhabited. The Roman Empire did not convert because Christians won debates. It converted — largely — because Christians showed up in the places of suffering (plague, poverty, abandonment) and behaved inexplicably. Their faithful presence provoked the question that the gospel answers. They were, as Rodney Stark documents in 'The Rise of Christianity,' a foretaste of the kingdom long before they were a majority in the culture.

Source: Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity (1997); missional presence as the early church's primary strategy

Conclusion: You Are Being Sent

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night — curious, cautious, carrying questions he could not ask in public. He was religious, educated, and powerful. But he was not yet sent. By the end of John's Gospel, this same man stands publicly at the cross, claiming the body of Jesus at enormous personal and political risk. Something transformed between that midnight conversation and that public act of courage. He moved from darkness into light. He moved from seeker to witness. He was, in the end, sent.

That arc — from curious to commissioned, from the safety of darkness to the risk of faithful presence — is the arc of the sent life. And it begins here, in this passage, with the most stunning sentence in all of Scripture: God so loved the world. Not the world as it should be. The world as it is — broken, confused, searching, sometimes hostile, always beloved.

The sending God has not stopped sending. The missio Dei that began with the Father sending the Son continues as the Spirit sends the church — this church, this missional community — into the neighborhood, the city, the cultural spaces where the kingdom of God is already breaking in.

So here is the commissioning that John 3:16-21 offers us: Go as light-bearers. Practice faithful presence in the third places where you already spend your time. Cultivate gospel fluency — the natural, honest capacity to connect your life and your neighbors' lives to the story of what God is doing in the world. Live as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the shalom that is coming. Practice discernment — learn to see where the Spirit is already at work and join it.

The already and not yet tension we live in is not a reason for anxiety. It is the engine of mission. The kingdom is breaking in. The light has come into the world. You are a sent people.

Go. The sending God is going with you.

John 3:16-21, John 19:39, John 20:21, 2 Corinthians 5:20

> **Illustration: As the Father Has Sent Me**
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> John 20:21 is the bookend to John 3:16. After the resurrection, Jesus appears to his gathered disciples and says: 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' The pattern is complete. The sending God sent the Son. The sent Son sends the church. The same incarnational logic — entering the world, dwelling among people, embodying the kingdom — now defines the church's identity and mission. We are not sent to build a better religious institution. We are sent to be the continuing embodiment of God's love for the kosmos. The sermon that began with a midnight conversation ends with a resurrection morning commission: you are sent people, joining God's work, carrying light into darkness, participating in the restoration of all things.
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> *Source: John 20:21; missional ecclesiology rooted in the Trinitarian sending pattern*

Applications

- This week, identify your two or three primary third places — the coffee shops, gyms, school settings, or neighborhood spaces where you already have natural, recurring presence. Commit to showing up in those spaces not as a religious project but as a genuine neighbor, practicing the unhurried art of neighboring.
- Practice one act of faithful presence this week that is not attached to any church program or event — invite a neighbor to dinner, volunteer at a community organization, show up to a school or civic event where you can be consistently present over time.
- Reflect on your gospel fluency: can you describe in plain, honest, non-jargon language what God has done in your life and what you understand God to be doing in the world? Practice telling that

story out loud — to a friend, in a journal, or to your family — until it feels natural rather than scripted.

• As a community, identify one neighborhood need or cultural space where your congregation could commit to sustained, incarnational presence over the next year — not as an outreach event but as a missional community taking up faithful residence.
• Spend five minutes in discernment prayer this week: ask God to show you where the Spirit is already at work in the lives of the people around you, and what it would look like to join that work rather than initiate your own.
• Memorize or journal on John 20:21 alongside John 3:16 — read them as a pair. Let the sending pattern of the Trinity form your identity: as the Father sent the Son, so the Son sends you.

Prayer Suggestions

• Father, you are the sending God — you did not stay at a distance but entered our world in flesh and blood. Give us the courage and humility to follow that pattern: to show up in the spaces where people actually are, to dwell among our neighbors rather than waiting for them to come to us.
• Lord Jesus, you are the light that came into the world. Help us to be carriers of that light — not aggressively or colonially, but with the quiet confidence of people who know where the light came from. May our presence in our neighborhoods be a sign of the kingdom you are bringing.
• Holy Spirit, you go before us into every cultural space and every human heart. Teach us the practice of discernment — to see where you are already at work, to recognize the longings and questions in our neighbors that only the gospel can answer, and to join what you are doing rather than substituting our own programs.
• God, give this community the imagination to see ourselves as a sent people — not a destination but a dispersal, not a fortress but a foretaste of the shalom you intend for all of creation. May we be a sign, instrument, and foretaste of your kingdom in this neighborhood.
• Lord, grow our gospel fluency — the capacity to speak naturally and honestly about what you are doing in the world and in our lives. May we be witnesses rather than salespeople, testifying to what we have seen and heard rather than performing a religious script.
• Father, where we have loved the darkness — the safety of insularity, the comfort of sameness, the ease of a church that only gathers and never scatters — forgive us and re-commission us. Remind us that you so loved the world, and that you are sending us into that same world with the same love.