

# The World God Loved: Light, Liberation, and the End of Condemnation

Progressive • Prophetic Imagination

John 3:16-21 • Mixed congregation

## Naming Reality: The Empire Owns the Verse

Somewhere along the way, the most quoted verse in all of Christendom became a weapon. John 3:16 — and we all know it, we can say it in our sleep, we have seen it on stadium placards and bumper stickers and the eye-black of athletes who score touchdowns — became not a proclamation of cosmic love but a sorting mechanism. A test. A border checkpoint. Present your theological credentials. State your doctrinal position. Because the dominant religious consciousness — what Walter Brueggemann calls the royal consciousness — has taken the wildest, most subversive declaration in the Gospel of John and domesticated it into an insurance policy that only certain people qualify for.

This is what empire does. Empire takes love and makes it conditional. Empire takes light and makes it a searchlight that exposes the wrong people. Empire takes the word 'world' — the Greek kosmos, meaning everything that exists, every creature, every ecosystem, every human being made in the image of God — and quietly narrows it to mean 'the right kind of people who believe the right kind of things.' This is the consciousness we inhabit without knowing it. This is the water we swim in.

The royal consciousness, as Brueggemann names it, produces numbness. It anesthetizes. It makes us unable to feel the pain of those whom religion condemns and unable to imagine a world ordered otherwise. We sit in our sanctuaries while people are dying outside — dying of poverty, dying of despair, dying of a thousand forms of structural violence — and we have learned not to feel it too deeply. We have learned to manage our grief with theology that explains away the suffering of the marginalized, that baptizes the status quo with sacred language, that mistakes the comfort of the privileged for the will of God.

And so John 3:16 gets preached Sunday after Sunday while people of color are being killed in the streets, while immigrants are processed in detention centers, while unhoused neighbors sleep in the cold three blocks from our steeple. The text has been tamed. The light has been redirected. And the darkness — not the darkness of individual souls, but the darkness of systemic sin, of structural oppression — continues to grow, unchallenged, unnamed.

John 3:16, John 3:19-20

### Illustration: The Stadium Sign

For decades, Rollen Stewart — known as 'Rainbow Man' — held up John 3:16 signs at televised sporting events. He wanted the world to see the verse. But by 1992 he had descended into violence and terror, taking hostages and issuing threats. The verse he carried had never expanded his circle of solidarity — it had contracted it, hardened it, until he saw everyone outside his theological boundary as an enemy. This is what happens when John 3:16 is severed from John 3:17: when love is preached without liberation, when the verse becomes a brand rather than a commission.

*Source: Original illustration*

## Prophetic Critique: Grieving the Darkness We Made

I want to grieve with you today. Not scold. Not lecture. Grieve.

Because something has been lost. Something precious. When Jesus says in this text that God sent the Son not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him — the word 'saved' in Greek is *sozo*. It means to heal, to make whole, to rescue, to deliver. It is the same word used when Jesus heals the sick, when the woman with the hemorrhage reaches through the crowd, when blind Bartimaeus cries out from the roadside. *Sozo* is a word of liberation, of wholeness, of shalom. And we have reduced it to a transaction — a checkbox on a metaphysical form, sign here, now you are in, goodbye.

The prophet grieves because that reduction has consequences. Real consequences. Cornel West has spent his life naming it: when Christianity becomes a tool of empire rather than a force for liberation, the people who get hurt first are always the same people who got hurt first in every other imperial arrangement — the poor, the Black, the brown, the queer, the undocumented, the disabled. God's preferential option for the poor becomes inverted into a theology that baptizes the wealth of the few and moralizes the poverty of the many.

I grieve for every LGBTQ+ teenager who was handed a John 3:16 tract and told simultaneously that God loves the world — but not them, not the way they are. I grieve for the Indigenous communities whose land was taken by people singing hymns and quoting Scripture, who were told the darkness belonged to them. I grieve for the incarcerated — disproportionately Black and brown because of systemic racism in the criminal legal system — who are told to find Jesus while the structural oppression that put them there goes unnamed from our pulpits. I grieve for the planet itself — the *kosmos* that God so loved — now choking under the weight of an economic system that treats creation as raw material for profit.

Verse 19 names it with devastating clarity: 'And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.' But notice — John does not say the poor loved darkness. He does not say the immigrant loved darkness. He does not say the queer child loved darkness. In the context of this Gospel, those who love darkness are the ones with power to maintain it — the Pharisees, the temple authorities, those who have built comfortable arrangements with empire and do not want a liberating light to expose those arrangements.

This is not merely personal sin. This is intersectionality made theological: the overlapping systems of religious authority, political power, and economic arrangement that conspire to keep certain people in the dark — and to keep the rest of us too numb to notice. William Barber calls it a heart attack in the body politic. Brian McLaren calls it the domination system. Brueggemann calls it Pharaoh's logic. Whatever we call it, it is real, it is present, and it is what the light of God has come to expose.

John 3:17, John 3:19-20, Amos 5:21-24

### Illustration: James Cone and the Cross on the Lynching Tree

James Cone spent decades asking American Christianity a question it refused to answer: How could white Christians sing about the cross while their neighbors were being lynched on trees just down the road? The cross and the lynching tree, Cone argued, are the same symbol — a state-sanctioned execution of an innocent person by the powers that benefit from maintaining racial hierarchy. When we allow Christianity to domesticate the crucifixion into a comfortable transaction, we lose the capacity to recognize crucifixion when it happens again. We love the darkness because we cannot afford to see the

light.

Source: James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011)

## Imaginative Alternative: The World That God Actually Loves

Now. Now I want to speak a different world into being.

Because the text — the actual text, the text before empire got its hands on it — is the most radically inclusive declaration ever uttered. 'God so loved the world.' The whole world. The kosmos. Not the church. Not the Christians. Not the people who have their theology sorted out. The world — which in John's usage means the realm estranged from God, the broken and beautiful and aching creation that has forgotten its source. God loved it anyway. God loved it first. God did not wait for the world to clean itself up before sending love into it.

Imagine what that means. Imagine a love that does not arrive conditional. Imagine a love that precedes your performance, your belief, your compliance with the demands of religious gatekeepers. Imagine a love that looks at the unhoused person under the bridge and says: beloved. A love that looks at the undocumented mother crossing the desert with her child and says: image of God. A love that looks at the prisoner, the addict, the person whose gender identity does not fit the binary, the elderly person dying alone in a nursing home — and says: I sent my Son for you. Not to condemn you. To liberate you. To make you whole.

This is the imaginative alternative that John 3:16-17 offers us. Not a sorting machine. Not a border checkpoint. A declaration of radical inclusion so subversive that it names the entire cosmos as the object of divine love and every creature in it as a candidate for liberation.

And the light — oh, the light — is not a searchlight looking for sinners to condemn. The light is the lamp that the woman in Luke 15 holds when she searches every corner of her house for the lost coin. The light is what exposes, yes — but what it exposes is not the unworthiness of the vulnerable. It exposes the systemic sin of the powerful. It exposes the deeds of those who have built their comfort on the suffering of others and prefer not to examine it too closely. The light is what Dr. King called the fierce urgency of now — the refusal to let the darkness of injustice continue to operate without prophetic witness.

Walter Brueggemann speaks of the prophetic imagination as the capacity to envision and speak a world that is not yet fully visible, but is promised. So let me speak it: I see a beloved community where the table is long and nobody is turned away. Where the first question is not 'what do you believe?' but 'are you hungry? are you safe? are you loved?' I see a church that treats John 3:16 not as a trophy verse but as a commission — because if God so loved the kosmos, then so must we, and that love must have hands and feet and a public address.

I see another world. And it is not a fantasy. It is already breaking in, already arriving in fragments and foretastes. Every time a congregation opens its doors to the unhoused. Every time a faith community stands in solidarity with immigrants at a detention center. Every time a church fires a prophetic witness into the darkness of white supremacy, poverty, and environmental destruction — the light is already there. The new creation is already beginning. God is making all things new, and we are invited to participate in that renewal. This is the eschatological hope that drives us forward: not escape from the world, but the transformation of it.

[John 3:16-17](#), [John 3:21](#), [Isaiah 65:17-19](#), [Revelation 21:1-5](#)

### Illustration: Building the Welcome Table

In the summer of 1963, as fire hoses were turned on children in Birmingham, Diane Nash — one of the architects of the Nashville sit-in movement — said something that has stayed in the memory of the movement: 'We are not fighting for a seat at their table. We are building the welcome table.' That distinction is everything. The beloved community is not assimilation into empire's existing arrangements. It is the construction of an entirely new table, long enough for everyone, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first — where human flourishing is not a reward for compliance but the birthright of every image-bearer.

*Source: Original illustration drawing on civil rights movement history and Nashville sit-in movement*

## Call to Faithful Action: Walking in the Light Together

John 3:21 ends this passage with a phrase almost always overlooked: 'But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.' Those who do what is true. Not those who believe the right things in the right sequence. Those who do.

This is the prophetic tradition's understanding of praxis — the insistence that theology without action is ideology, that faith without justice is fantasy, that knowing the truth about the beloved community requires walking in the direction of it. Conscientization — the term Paulo Freire gave us — is the process of waking up to reality as it is, not as the dominant culture has narrated it, and then acting from that awakened perspective. John 3 calls us to that.

So what do we do? Not as isolated individuals managing personal piety, but as a community called to embody the justice of the kingdom, to be a prophetic witness in this time and place?

We name the darkness by name. In our prayers, our sermons, our presence at city council meetings and school board hearings, we name racism, we name poverty, we name the structural oppression that the dominant culture has trained us not to see. Prophetic witness is specific. It does not speak of 'brokenness' in the abstract — it names the broken systems and asks who benefits from keeping them broken.

We extend the table. Concretely. Who is not in this room? Who has been told that they belong to the darkness? Invite them — not as a project, not as an outreach mission, but as neighbors whose presence makes the common good more common, whose voices make our community more whole.

We practice restorative justice. Our criminal legal system is built on condemnation — the very thing John 3:17 says God did not come to do. The church can model an alternative: restorative circles, accompaniment for the formerly incarcerated, advocacy for policies that prioritize human flourishing over punishment.

We tend the kosmos God loves. Creation care is not a political add-on for progressive Christians — it is a theological necessity. God loved the world: this world, with its soil and water and air and warming oceans. We cannot preach John 3:16 and ignore the climate crisis.

William Barber calls this the Third Reconstruction — a moral movement that refuses to let darkness have the final word. We are invited into it. Not because we have it all figured out, but because the light has come, and we have seen it, and we cannot pretend the darkness is normal anymore. Go. Walk in the light. Build the beloved community. The world — this beautiful, broken, beloved world — is waiting.

### Illustration: Rev. William Barber and the Moral Monday Movement

In 2013, Rev. William Barber II began leading weekly protests at the North Carolina state legislature — what became known as the Moral Monday movement. Thousands of people, many of them from faith communities, were arrested in acts of civil disobedience against legislation that cut Medicaid, gutted voting rights, and defunded public education. Barber called it 'the work of the Spirit' — not political activism separate from faith, but the praxis of a community that had read its Bible and could not stay silent. Deeds done in God. That is what walking in the light looks like when a whole community does it together.

*Source: Rev. William Barber II, The Third Reconstruction: Moral Mondays, Fusion Politics, and the Rise of a New Justice Movement*

## Applications

- Read John 3:16-21 this week with the Greek word kosmos in mind — every person you encounter is included in 'the world God loved.' Let that reframe how you see the person asking for help at the intersection, the neighbor who is different from you, the coworker you find most difficult.
- Identify one system of structural oppression affecting your community — housing inequity, the criminal legal system, immigration enforcement, environmental injustice — and research one organization practicing restorative justice in that space. Commit to showing up with your body, not just your prayers.
- As a congregation, audit your welcome table: who is not present, who has been implicitly or explicitly told that the darkness belongs to them? Name it honestly in community and make one concrete structural change toward radical inclusion.
- Practice prophetic naming in your prayers this week. Speak of specific systems of injustice rather than vague brokenness. Pray for the unhoused by name if you know them. Pray for those in detention. Pray for communities bearing the disproportionate weight of climate destruction and industrial pollution.
- Read Walter Brueggemann's Prophetic Imagination or Brian McLaren's The Great Spiritual Migration alongside Scripture this month. Let your theological imagination be stretched toward the beloved community God is already building in the spaces we have not yet learned to look.

## Prayer Suggestions

- God of the whole kosmos, awaken us to the fullness of the love declared in John 3:16 — a love that precedes our performance, transcends our gatekeeping, and reaches every person we have been trained to exclude. Disturb our comfort. Disrupt our numbness. Expand our table.
- We confess the ways our communities have weaponized this text — using 'God so loved the world' to sort the world into worthy and unworthy, saved and condemned. We grieve the damage done to those pushed into darkness by religious systems that should have been light. Give us courage to repair what we have broken.
- Spirit of liberation, move over the chaos of this present moment — over the darkness of white supremacy, poverty, environmental destruction, and systemic sin. Let your light expose what needs to be named and empower us to speak truth to power without flinching.
- For those who have been told they belong to the darkness — the LGBTQ+ young person rejected by their church, the immigrant fleeing violence and finding condemnation at the border, the incarcerated person forgotten by the body of Christ — may they know that the light came for them. That they are beloved. That the kosmos God loved includes them.
- God, make us a community that does what is true — that our deeds might be done in you, that our praxis might embody the shalom of the kingdom, that the beloved community you are already building might find in us willing, joyful, courageous participants. Give us solidarity with the marginalized. Give us prophetic imagination. Give us each other.