Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Billy D. Strayhorn reminds us of an old Dennis the Menace cartoon. In the cartoon, “Dennis and his little friend Joey are leaving Mrs. Wilson's house, their hands full of cookies. Joey says, ‘I wonder what we did to deserve this.’ Dennis answers, ‘Look, Joey. Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies not because we're nice, but because she's nice.’”

Most of us have heard of the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world…” We see it on placards at football games; we see it scrawled on a piece of cardboard and held by the homeless person on the street corner; we see it in movies and TV shows; we see it on T-shirts and coffee mugs and baseball caps.

Similar to Mrs. Wilson and her delicious cookies, God so loved the world, not because we deserve it, but because God’s nature is to love us.

I. God’s Love for Nicodemus, a Pharisee

In John chapter 3, Jesus is teaching Nicodemus, a respected Pharisee, about how to be born again or, more accurately, how to be “born from above.” Mickey Anders writes about this teaching of Jesus:

“Windborne! That's a far better moniker for Christians than that mistaken term ‘born again.’ That's a phrase we picked up from Nicodemus' misunderstanding of entering a second time into the mother's womb rather than Jesus' terminology ‘born from above’ or ‘born of the Spirit.’ ‘No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and wind -- Spirit --
Windborne speaks of being carried along by the wind of the Spirit of God. Here is a lifestyle that is not bogged down with the how questions, but a life that soars among the clouds powered by the mystery of God. ‘The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.’ Ours is a life filled with mystery and the unexplainable.

“Science has taught us to ask the how questions. Our contemporary culture seems to be obsessed with the tangible, the explainable, and the measurable. And we are tempted to believe that the only reality is that which we can see and touch. But Jesus calls us to a life of the spirit. It's a life lifted by the invisible power of the wind.”

In our gospel reading for this morning we pick up in the middle of Jesus’ “windborne” teaching to Nicodemus. We can assume that part of the message we are to receive from this Bible passage is that Jesus calls you and me to be windborne, to be borne away on the breezes of His Holy Spirit.

Those of you who attended the Lenten program last Sunday afternoon had the joy of hearing John Nilsen at the piano. To me, his music was transporting, inexpressibly beautiful and inspirational and delightful.

One piece John played was a composition of his own. He shared that when he first wrote this piece, he performed it while it was still in process. He then asked the audience for advice as to what to call the piece. Many suggestions were shared by the crowd. Finally, from the back of the room, a young man called out, “Dude! You gotta call it ‘Hot Air Balloon.’”

Well, if you heard John play ‘Hot Air Balloon’ on the piano, you know that this is exactly the right name for that piece of music. Even if you didn’t hear it, what I can tell you is this: We
are the hot air balloons, God’s Holy Spirit is the wind that moves us. God’s love is the power that carries us joyfully from moment to moment, if we will only allow Him into our lives.

II. God’s love for the whole world

Jesus, being Jewish, recalls for Nicodemus the story of Moses and the serpent, from the book of Numbers, chapter 21. The brass serpent, raised up on a pole, is a symbol of salvation for ancient Israel. Jesus declares that the Son of Man, or he himself, will be lifted up as a sign of salvation, as well.

But in verse 16, that famous verse, Jesus proclaims, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Jesus is lifted up, not only for the salvation of his people, Israel, but for the whole world. Gentiles included. You and me, and Moses and Nicodemus, too.

It is easy to hear this popular verse and let it go right over our heads. Whoosh! Yeah, yeah. Right. John 3:16. For God so loved the world, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah…

We need to slow down and notice the huge implications of this verse, and the verses that surround it. God loves the whole world. God loves you! God loves me! God loves your worst enemy! God loves my worst enemy! God wants to save each one of us from ourselves and from each other. From the darkness to which we are so susceptible.

God promises eternal life NOW. Jesus uses the present tense when he says that “everyone who believes in him may not perish myt may have eternal life.” Eternal life begins now. Today! Oh, there is so much in this famous little verse! We can imagine that Jesus delves into deep spiritual mysteries for hours and hours, probably days and days, as he teaches Nicodemus about the spiritual truth of God’s great love for him.
In the verses that follow, Jesus talks about condemnation and grace, darkness and light, judgment and forgiveness. Nicodemus, who sneaks out at night to visit Jesus so his colleagues won’t see him…Nicodemus receives from Jesus the necessary teachings, and even moreso the time and attention for which he is so hungry, from Jesus. Jesus spends time with him, I am sure, listening and talking. I imagine Nicodemus crying and Jesus patiently sitting with him. I picture Nicodemus arguing, and Jesus lovingly hearing his objections, until he tires of beating his head against the truth. Until he opens his heart and allows the Spirit of Christ to lift that hot air balloon and send it soaring above the clouds.

Sharon Rhodes-Wickett is a beloved colleague of mine from up the road at the Claremont church. She writes about the judgment that haunts preachers in particular and people in general, and how that dark anxiety can be difficult to shake off. She writes:

“Most preachers have preacher dreams. I am sure every profession has its own particular variation. They are often recurring and usually show clearly the preacher's feelings of inadequacy. Early in my ministry, I used to put my sermon on the pulpit before worship so it would already be in place when I got there to preach. The problem with that is the accompanying dream I would have on many Saturday nights. In my dream, I would step up to the pulpit and the sermon would not be there. The dream took many shapes and forms, but it always came down to the missing sermon and me having nothing to say. Nothing. The dream stopped when I started carrying my sermon with me. More recently I had a dream that I came by the church and a wedding was beginning. I suddenly realized I should be up there performing the wedding, and I was completely unprepared. So you can see a common thread in these preacherly dreams...unprepared and unable. It reveals the dark side of us, the part of us that
really needs the grace. It reveals that even if I sing ‘God Is Love,’ and ‘Jesus Loves Me,’ there is nevertheless that judgment there that haunts me, even in my dreams.”

Jesus sits with Nicodemus and leads him from the dark place of judgment to the grace-filled knowledge of God’s love. Nicodemus has been stuck in the place of judgment due to his own misunderstanding of God. God has not consigned him to that place of judgment; he has put himself there. Like you and I so often do, Nicodemus has believed the negative voices in his head and on the lips of his colleagues more than he has believed the loving voice of God.

III. God’s Love Brings Light to Our Darkness

Nicodemus is sort of like the young man in a story that Brett Blair tells about, “a young man who entered a very strict monastic order. It was so strict that members were permitted to speak only two words per year to the abbot. At the end of year one the young man appeared before the abbot and spoke his two words, ‘bad food.’ At the end of the second year the young man appeared before the abbot and spoke two more words, ‘hard bed.’ At the end of year three he came to the abbot and spoke his last two words, ‘I quit.’ The abbot responded, ‘Well it is about time. Complain, complain, complain -- that’s all you’ve done since you came here.’

Blair continues: “We humans are people of darkness. People who complain, rebel, work against the Kingdom of God. Death is all we know. Lives filled with the patterns of sin. However, God does an astonishing thing. He brings the light. He erects a cross of death that we might look up and live. He leads us out of the darkness. He loves the world and does not condemn it. He does not condemn you, if...if you will believe.”

We are not told if Nicodemus comes to belief. He visits Jesus under cover of darkness. But we can hope that he responded to Jesus’ presence, to Jesus’ love, and to Jesus’ teachings.
You and I have the opportunity to respond to God’s love as expressed in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, “So many church members are secondhand Christians. They have inherited it from their families, borrowed it from their friends, married it, taken it over like the cut of their clothes from the fashion of their group.”

By way of contrast, William Muehl, who taught at Yale Divinity School for many years, once noted how instructive it is to realize how many of the men and women in the pews almost did not come to church that morning. “In all probability,” he writes, “most of them feel that they are there under false pretenses, that everyone around them feels more confidently Christian, less restlessly rebellious than they do themselves.”

Faith is such a delicate thing, in a certain sense. God, through His great love for us, is gentle with us at those times when we feel most vulnerable, most doubt-filled, most hurt and lost and lonely in our life’s journey. Faith is ours due to God’s action, due to God’s grace, due to God’s great love for each of us. We build our hot air balloon, we stoke a fire to fill up the balloon. But it is the Holy Spirit – blowing where it will – that moves us from here to there.

In the Passionate Spirituality study that some of us are engaged in during Lent, Christian A. Schwarz talks about the concept of “radical balance.” What he means by this term is that we are to be radically in love with God, connecting with Him by whatever means is most natural for us. Once we have this radical connection with God, we look around in love at our brothers and sisters in Christ. To find spiritual balance, we learn to value and appreciate the different ways Christians connect with God and His great love. We allow the Holy Spirit to float us from here to there and back to here again, learning from the vastness of God’s love how to love one another.
Closing.

First we must feel the assurance of God’s love. Sometimes we forget how deeply true John 3:16 is. We forget the depth of God’s passionate love for each one of us. Have you forgotten how much God loves you?

Fred Craddock tells this stunning story, as adapted by James Fitzgerald, about Craddock’s father, who spent years of his life hiding from the God who was seeking him out:

“When the pastor used to come from my mother’s church to call on him, my father would say, 'You don’t care about me. I know how churches are. You want another pledge, another name, right? Another name, another pledge, isn’t that the whole point of church? Get another name, another pledge.'

“'My nervous mother would run to the kitchen, crying, for fear somebody’s feelings would be hurt. When we had an evangelistic campaign the pastor would bring the evangelist, introduce him to my father and then say, 'Sic him, get him! Sic him, get him!' My father would always say the same thing. 'You don’t care about me! Another name, another pledge. Another name, another pledge! I know about churches.'

“I guess I heard it a thousand times. One time he didn’t say it. He was at the Veteran’s Hospital. He was down to 74 pounds. They had taken out the throat, put in a metal tube, and said, 'Mr. Craddock, you should have come earlier. But this cancer is awfully far advanced. We’ll give radium, but we don’t know.'

“I went in to see him. In every window—potted plants and flowers. Everywhere there was a place to set them—potted plants and flowers. Even in that thing that swings out over your bed they put food on, there was a big flower. There was by his bed a stack of cards 10 or 15 inches deep. I looked at the cards sprinkled in the flowers. I read the cards beside his bed. And I
want to tell you, every card, every blossom, every potted plant from groups, Sunday School classes, women’s groups, youth groups, men’s bible class, of my mother’s church—every one of them. My father saw me reading them. He could not speak, but he took a Kleenex box and wrote something on the side from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. . . . He wrote on the side, 'In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.' I said, 'What is your story, Daddy?' And he wrote, 'I was wrong.'

“It is not until you know God is seeking you in love, not in condemnation; it is not until that moment that the gospel becomes Good News for you.”

May you hear and receive – today! -- the good news of God’s great love for you.

Amen.