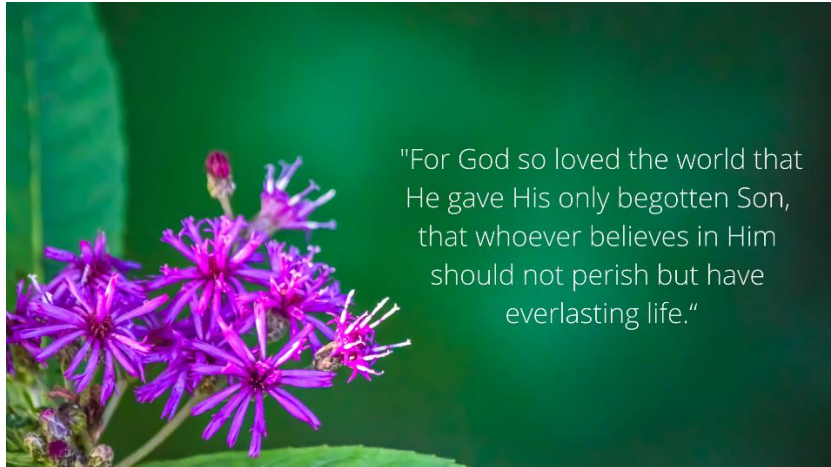


Today's scripture features a secret night meeting between two men who see spirituality very differently. Jesus has been making waves in Jerusalem. His preaching and actions have inspired some to believe he may be a new prophet, possibly even the messiah. Others think he is a fraud, and possibly a danger to the fragile truce between the Jews and the Roman authorities. The people in charge of keeping the Romans happy sit on the High Council. They are fearful that Jesus might cause a riot, and a swift crackdown by the Romans. But one of the council members senses that Jesus may be the real deal, so he arranges a secret meeting. That man is Nicodemus.



They meet in secret, at night. If Nicodemus hoped for a straightforward explanation from Jesus, he is sorely disappointed. Jesus speaks in riddles and metaphors, stating that to be truly spiritual one must be born again. Jesus says that if you can't predict where the wind will blow, how can you ever understand where the Holy Spirit will go? Poor Nicodemus finds this all totally perplexing. To him, the worship of God is much more straightforward: live according to the law, pray, make sacrifices. Faith is what you do, filled with actions and rituals. Jesus counters that faith is about spirit and belief.

Perhaps the most perplexing words are when Jesus says that whoever believes in the Son of God is saved, but those who do not are already condemned.



Those words have become famous. They declare that if you want to get to God, you need to believe in Jesus. I used to ride past a Salvation army building that had those words on its wall. Long before I became a Christian those words gave me the shivers. Not because I found them inspiring, but because they seemed to lock so many people out of God's love. Why should believing that Jesus is the son of God be the only way to be true to God? What about people who follow other faiths? What about people with no faith? Is it really as simple as believe in Jesus or you are damned? To me, and many others, those words were not a blessing, but toxic.

Over the past year, it has been easy to be so obsessed with all things Covid-related, that other major events have been overlooked. That is particularly true in the past two weeks as we have approached the anniversary of the lockdown. While the press and the rest of us have been thinking about what this year has meant, religious history was being made in Iraq. Pope Francis, leader of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics flew to Iraq for a tour of the country.<sup>1</sup> He is the first Pope to ever visit this Muslim country,<sup>2</sup> which has a small, dwindling population of 250,000 Christians.<sup>3</sup>

The Pope made a point of going to Mosul, a city in Northern Iraq.

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<sup>1</sup> 1.3 billion: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/5/pope-francis-calls-for-end-to-extremism-in-first-address-in-iraq>

<sup>2</sup> [Chico Harlan](#), "The whiplash of covering the pope's Iraq trip: A year of tight covid rules in Italy, then 72 hours of crowds" *Washington Post*, March 8, 2021

<sup>3</sup> BBC, "Pope Francis visits regions of Iraq once held by Islamic State," <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56309779>



Here he addressed Christians in a square surrounded by the bombed-out ruins of four churches. Christians used to call Mosul home before ISIS invaded in 2014. Over the next three years, they killed and tortured Christians and other non-Muslims.

ISIS declared that they would create a new caliphate that would rule the Middle East from Mosul. Disregarding Islam's protection for Christians and Jews, churches were ransacked, Bibles burned, Christians persecuted.<sup>4</sup> Another religious minority, the Yazidi, suffered mass executions, and their women were enslaved.<sup>5</sup> ISIS was finally driven from Mosul in 2017. It is hard to think of a better example of the evils of religious fundamentalism. In a place like Mosul, it may seem like the world would be better off without religion of any kind.

The Pope came to give encouragement to the Christian minority who had been persecuted, and also to have a special meeting. Islam is divided into two major denominations, Sunnis, which are the majority, and Shi'ites. Most people in Iraq are Shi'ites. Pope Francis came to Iraq to meet the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the head of all Shi'ites in Iraq, and for much of the Middle East.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48333923> - book burning is on video.

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Iraq" Events of 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/iraq>



The Ayatollah is greatly respected throughout the Middle East. He is 90 years old, and reclusive. He rarely meets with anyone, much less foreigners.<sup>6</sup> But he did agree to have a private meeting with the Pope. After a brief photo op, they met in private for 45 minutes.

Like the meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus, these two men come from very different spiritual places. The Pope would not have asked the Ayatollah to apologize for the actions of ISIS – those violent fundamentalists are Sunnis, not Shi'ites. But what could the Pope have been talking about with the Ayatollah? Our scripture reading today clearly states that to reach God, one must go through the Son of God. Jesus does appear in Koran, but only as a prophet, not as the Messiah. Was the Pope telling the Ayatollah that Muslims need to find Jesus to be saved? And if not, why would the Pope want to have a meeting with this Muslim cleric?

This is not the first time Pope Francis has met with Muslim religious leaders. One of the Pope's priorities has been to foster inter religious dialogue and co-operation. In this, he draws on the principles of interfaith respect that were declared in the 1960s with Vatican II.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Pope insists that this is the only way to go, and those who preach hatred of other faiths are out of step with the church.<sup>8</sup>

But how can Christians welcome other faiths if our gospel says that the only way to God the Father is through the Son of God? That declaration appears in the Gospel of John, so one way to answer the question is ask what did the term "Son of God" mean to John?

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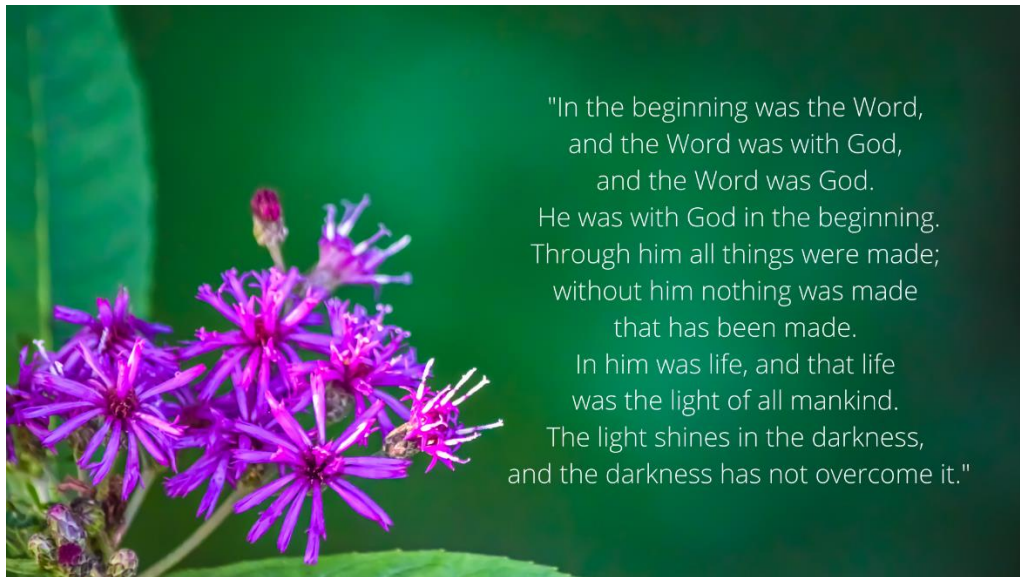
<sup>6</sup> BBC, "Pope Francis visits regions of Iraq once held by Islamic State," <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56309779>

<sup>7</sup> "Nostra Aetate," Pope Paul VI, October 28, 1965.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/pope-francis-pushes-catholic-church-towards-interfaith-dialogue-on-travels/a-41571122>

We assume that he means Jesus of Nazareth, that holy man who walked the dusty roads of Galilee 2000 years ago. But as Nicodemus discovers, when Jesus speaks, it is often in metaphor. Nicodemus is told he must be born again, which is clearly impossible if understood literally. Jesus speaks of spiritual being in terms of Light and Dark, again, metaphors. So, what does Jesus mean when he speaks of the "Son of God?"

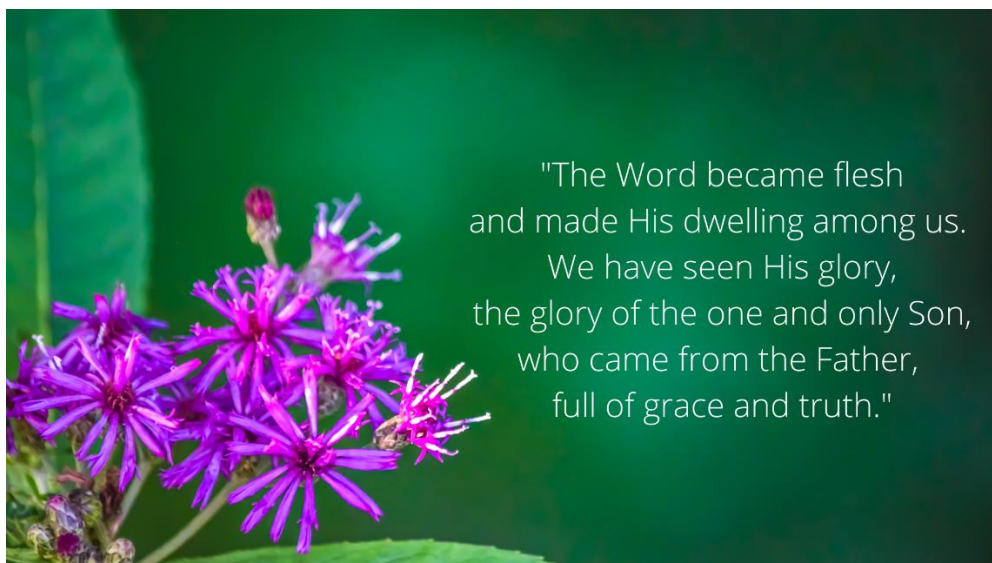
Fortunately, John gives us a clear answer. At the beginning of John's Gospel, there is the famous prologue that starts with the words,



This Word is the aspect of God which creates all reality. If it can be known, it comes from the Word. The Word is the life force of the universe. The Word calls reality into being, speaks it into being, hence the term the Word. It is the life force in everything that is alive, every tree, bush, animal, fish and every breath we take.

A few sentences later in the prologue, John's gospel says:





The Word is the Son.

This Son existed before time and space were created. This Son, in John's terms, helped God the Father create the stars and galaxies, the DNA and everything we see around us. And it is this Son that becomes flesh as Jesus of Nazareth 2000 years ago.

This is the key to understanding what Jesus means when he says that you can only reach God the Father through the Son. He does not mean only people who believe Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah will be saved. I know that's what we often hear, but that is a misunderstanding. When Jesus said those words, there were maybe a few hundred people who were followers of Jesus. If those words meant believe in Jesus or be damned, then everyone born before Jesus was damned, every Egyptian, Babylonian, Mayan, Huron, Inuit – all were doomed because they never heard of Jesus. And even after Christ's death and resurrection, it took over a thousand years for the gospel to reach the Americas, Asia, Australia, and southern Africa. Jesus does not mean believe in me or be damned. No loving God would make that a condition, it is simply absurd.

Instead, what John is saying is that those who can sense the sacred light in the world will have access to the source of that light. Those who act in compassion and love, particularly towards people who are strangers, are already living in that light that shines from the Word, the Son of God which has existed for all of time. God is love, and those who live by that impulse are sons and daughters of God, even if they have never heard of Jesus.

This broad, cosmic definition of the Son of God has not always been followed. During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church and Protestants insisted that Jesus was the only

way to God. The Crusades were launched on that basis. But today, we know better. Catholics and Protestants in the World Council of Churches have recognized that God's spirit does not just reside in Christians. It blows all through the world, entering people of goodwill everywhere who seek to live according to compassion, peace and love, especially when offered to strangers. The capacity to love and care for someone you do not know is the hallmark of the presence of the holy spirit working through you, regardless of faith.

That is why Pope Francis has reached out to people of all faiths. Not to convert them, but as allies in creating a better world for all humans. In his words, "The same Spirit everywhere brings forth various forms of practical wisdom which help people to bear suffering and to live in greater peace and harmony."<sup>9</sup>

The treasure of faith is that it offers a way to have a relationship with the universe. John speaks of it as The Word, because words are part of a conversation, between you and the rest of creation, and its Creator. But for many, faith waxes and wanes. At times, the feeling of being in relationship with God is strong in youth, but comes and goes in adulthood. We become like Nicodemus meeting with Jesus. Religion can sound like a bunch of riddles. But what today's scripture suggests that you are always in the presence of God, whether you feel it or not. The Holy Spirit is like the wind, it comes and goes, lands in some people strongly for a while, then goes somewhere else. Sometimes we feel it, other times we don't. None of us can control this wind, it is not like a genie we can summon on command. Instead, all we can do is keep our windows open so it can blow in when it wants. For some, it seeps through the cracks of closed doors, appearing even among those who have no belief in it at all. It is mysterious, not subject to natural laws we can codify. But take heart – this universe loves you, even when you can't feel it. This universe wants to be in a relationship with you. Whether you leave the door open or not is up to you. In the meantime, act with love, with people you know, and those you don't.

In the end, Nicodemus was not able to stop the Jewish High Council from ordering Jesus' execution. But he did show up at night, once more, to help bring down Christ's body from the cross. He brought with him perfumes for embalming. We don't know if he did this out of respect, or if he felt Christ's power. Either way, he showed love and compassion, and is now known throughout the world as a seeker who helped someone he barely knew. In that way, the world will be saved.

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html#Interreligious\\_dialogue](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#Interreligious_dialogue)

Amen.