



*Patricia Thomas*

Whenever I see a Bible verse on a hand-painted sign, I look it up because I am curious to know which scriptural message the person wishes to convey to the rest of us. I began this practice years ago when John 3:16 popped up behind home plate at my first baseball game.

This week I invite you to join me in a visit with seven *Three-Sixteens*, two from the Hebrew Testament and five from the Christian Testament. All but the shortest books have their own 3:16, so my choices are decidedly an abbreviated consideration of a fascinating collection.

In spite of a dreadful 2014 hockey season, I am still an avid Columbus Blue Jackets fan!

*BIBLE READING: John 3:16*

My birthday falls in the middle of the baseball season, and my dad, being a consummate baseball aficionado and Detroit Tigers fan, decided to take me—his firstborn—to a Yankees-Tigers game for my eighth birthday. We had terrific seats along the first base line with an unobstructed view of the field including the batter's box and the mesh curtain behind home base. Thus began a life-long tradition of baseball on my birthday.

Before Jumbotron scoreboards and continuous music, I occupied myself between innings by scanning the crowd, wondering what my fellow fans were doing with this in-between time. In the fifth inning, I spotted a man in the stands behind home plate bouncing a yellow cardboard sign up and down, rotating it this way and that. When he finally turned our direction, I was able to read the thick, hand-printed red letters.

“Dad, what’s John three sixteen?”

“It’s a verse from the Bible,” he replied, “and people like your man over there want everybody to know and remember how important its message is.”

Now whenever I spot a Bible verse on a bumper sticker or piece of jewelry, on a notebook, or painted on a barn, I scurry to the nearest source, usually my iPhone, and look it up, curious to discover the message important enough to tell the world about.

What verse(s) do you carry, if not on your bumper then in your heart, that remind you of God’s love for the world?

*SONG: To God Be the Glory*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, I am strengthened in faith whenever I remember the breadth and depth of your love for all creation.*

—Patricia Thomas

*BIBLE READING: James 3:16*

We are now deep into what many pundits have named “the silly season”—that oftentimes tedious slog through the primaries which leads up to the eventual election of a new president. Along the way, the American public must sort through the rhetoric of promises and warnings to decide who is a wise and compassionate candidate. Discernment might just be the chief task before us.

The context for this Three-Sixteen is a discussion of two kinds of wisdom, the one earthly and unspiritual, “of the devil”; the other pure and sincere, peace-loving and full of mercy. Our verse comes on the heels of James’s expressed dismay that “no man can tame the tongue”; he wonders aloud how it can be that the same mouth which praises God can turn and curse another human being. Only those deeds done with humility are the fruit of true wisdom.

In the working draft of my third mystery novel, the captain of the Emerick College football team invites the plain-Jane, brainy coed in his Intro to Bible class to the homecoming dance because he needs a ten-page term paper. Unable to believe her good fortune, Ina readily writes Troy’s paper—a seemingly harmless token of her appreciation for the good time he showed her that Saturday night. When the knowing glances and whispers up and down the residence hallway finally catch up with her, disorder is the only possible outcome of the quarterback’s selfish ambition and Ina is left heartbroken and feeling betrayed.

*SONG: Break Thou the Bread of Life*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear One, please hear the praises, concerns, joys and sorrows of your people. Grant us the ability to discern words of wisdom which strengthen community from words filled with self-aggrandizement and fear.*

—Patricia Thomas

*BIBLE READING: Nehemiah 3:16*

At the end of the Babylonian exile, Nehemiah inquires about the Jewish remnant who survived and about conditions back in the ruined city of Jerusalem. “They are in great trouble and shame, and the walls of Jerusalem are broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire,” came the reply, and Nehemiah broke down in tears. After days of mourning, fasting, and prayer, he begs the Lord to forgive his people and allow them to return home. In practical terms this meant Nehemiah must obtain permission from King Artaxerxes. The great king not only consented but sent army officers and cavalry along for protection.

Our Scripture today is one small vignette in the narrative about the reconstruction of the holy city. Jews came from every tribe, every corner of the Diaspora. Common workers, priests, skilled carpenters and stone masons, even rulers of local districts pitched in. Shoulder to shoulder they worked from first light of day until the stars came out, then slept behind the walls at night to protect the city from further destruction by the enemies of Israel.

Our work for the kingdom is built upon the shoulders of all those dedicated souls who bring their skills to the task at hand. Every mission trip; every carry-in; every pastoral visit with the sick, the disabled, the incarcerated; every stitch of a layette or prayer shawl; every penny placed in the collection jar combines to further God’s love for all God’s people.

*SONG: Take My Life and Let It Be*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Please receive and bless all our offerings, God, and use them to comfort, encourage, and rebuild the broken places in your kingdom.*

—Patricia Thomas

*BIBLE READING: 1 Corinthians 3:16*

The little community of Jesus-followers in the port city of Corinth is growing like crazy, but Paul harbors deep concerns about the direction their fellowship appears to be heading and writes to tell them so.

According to T. Canby Jones, today's Three-Sixteen presents us with a query (a question to be answered under the guidance of the Holy Spirit) to draw individuals and meetings to Truth. As is the case with all our Friends queries, the reader is invited to move beyond a first "yes" or "no" and wait until a more measured response arises. For example, I might ponder the nature of my affirmation that God's Spirit lives in me, wondering what difference the intimate presence of God makes in my life, in my relationships, in setting priorities for this day as well as for the long haul. If the initial response to Paul's query is "no," then further contemplation might include consideration of the metaphor of human body and spirit as God's temple. What feelings arise deep within when I hold the image of my own very ordinary flesh and bone body as a temple of the Divine?

There is a second two-part element to traditional Quaker queries: the question addresses the community of faith as well as the individual believer, thereby inviting a corporate response as well. In what ways do we experience our church community as a place where God's Spirit lives?

*SONG: Welcome, Welcome*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Thank you, God, for good questions; for your persistence in asking, and for your patience in waiting while we struggle to discern your truth.*

—Patricia Thomas

*BIBLE READING: Ecclesiastes 3:16*

Chapter 3 begins with perhaps the most well-known and oft-sung passage in the Hebrew Testament: *For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.* Then in 3:16 the teacher launches into the baffling unfairness of the world and wonders if existence is meaningless after all.

Someone in our little Bible study group suggested we consult *The Message* to see how Eugene Peterson handles 3:16 and the surrounding verses, so Phil looked it up. “I took another good look at what’s going on: The very place of judgment—corrupt! The place of righteousness—corrupt!” We began comparing footnotes: there is unfairness where there should be justice; there is injustice in the law court; injustice and oppression will be judged when God decides it is the proper time, but meanwhile innocent and guilty suffer the same fate as animals. (That from the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*.) It all sounded so painfully familiar, so twenty-first century.

How do we bear the incongruities inherent in our Judeo-Christian tradition? When held side-by-side-by-side, these *why* questions are a reflection of our society and its multifaceted relationship with the Creator. From the beginning, humankind has wondered why an all-powerful God tolerates evil alongside goodness and mercy. Perhaps the ancient teacher’s conclusion serves us still: “Fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (12:13-14 ESV).

*SONG: Be Still, My Soul*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, we live in the now-and-not-yet of your kingdom here on earth, as have all the saints and sinners before us. May our trust in you reflect the trust Jesus had in your faithfulness.*

—Patricia Thomas

*BIBLE READING: Revelation 3:16*

The image of God spitting (sometimes translated as vomiting), always gives me pause not only because it is such a graphic metaphor but because the reason for this violent response, the state of lukewarmness of the church at Laodicea, goes counter to my own experience. Something lukewarm usually feels good on the way down and doesn't upset my tummy, while the minute scalding hot or icy cold hits the roof of my mouth, I spit it out because it hurts!

We all grew up knowing that hot food must be kept hot and cold food cold or we would get sick from bacteria that grow in room-temperature food. Is God's word about lukewarmness like being told to "fish or cut bait," "to stop straddling the fence"? I suspect the counsel is the same: decide what is vital to you and take a stand.

The verses surrounding our Three-Sixteen make it very clear that in the "words of the Amen," God wants us to know Christ's voice and love for us well enough that when Jesus knocks on the door and we hear his voice, we fling open the door and enter enthusiastically into fellowship and communion of a meal together.

And be sure the food is either *hot* or *cold*, okay?

*SONG: Oh, How I Love Jesus*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, lukewarm is comfortable and has its place in my life, but may I never become complacent in my relationship with you.*

—Patricia Thomas

*BIBLE READING: Colossians 3:16*

Our final Three-Sixteen is chock full of verbs: teach, admonish, sing, dwell; and filled with wondrous spiritual concepts: the word of Christ, wisdom as the source of truth. But how can we celebrate in the midst of war, the seemingly endless threat of terrorism, the numbing reality of poverty, homelessness, hunger, heroin addiction?

When doom and gloom threaten to overtake me, I turn to one of my favorite passages from George Fox's pastoral letters: "Sing and rejoice, you children of the Day and of the Light. *For the Lord is at work* in this thick night of darkness that may be felt." The foundation for hope and gratitude lies in the italics: God is on duty 24/7 which means Love also is at work 24/7. Our ability to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs arises from a personal faith and trust in God. This trust is organic, powerful, and alive within, keeping us anchored to our Source even when the darkness has become so thick it feels impossible to take another step.

As people of faith in an increasingly interconnected global society, it is possible to be a bearer of hope and good news to those close to us in our families, and in our local communities both secular and religious. Sometimes the work we are called to is aimed at changing our nation's priorities, strategies, and decision-making. And sometimes, because of the gratitude which dwells in our hearts, we simply burst into songs of thanksgiving and praise.

*SONG: Praise Him! Praise Him!*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, knowing that you are at work in the thick night of darkness gives me the strength and courage to take the next step. Therefore, I will sing your praise.*

—Patricia Thomas