

Lent 4
March 11, 2018

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

For many Christians the reading we heard from John's gospel this morning contains some of the most comforting and reassuring words found in the gospels:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

These words are very familiar to us. Indeed, for some they are a litmus test for one's faith. These words, or at least the chapter and verse reference to them, are often very visible at many public events. Who has not seen someone waving a large placard at a nationally televised sporting events with "John 3:16" plastered on it in huge letters. Or, a well-known football player with "JN 3:16" painted on his cheek until the NCAA said "Stop it!"

This verse from John's gospel is so often quoted by itself that we don't remember the context of its origin. This morning we heard that context ... or did we. Our gospel reading this morning begins at the 14th verse of the third chapter of John with the words:

"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up ..."

Now, I'm always suspicious of something that begins with the conjunction "and." It sounds like we are staring in the middle of a conversation. A conversation with whom? And what was said before the conjunction "and?" I think the context for these words is important for us as we try to uncover their full meaning. Although our reading this morning give some of the context, it does not provide it all. So, let me read to you the beginning of the story. This begins at John 3:1.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of

Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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.

So, let us consider not just the portion of John's gospel included on the bulletin insert, but this entire conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. In so doing, I hope that it will add to our understanding of the whole, not just one part of it.

First, this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is highly symbolic and therefore mysterious and mystical. Second, this conversation is about conversion ... not just a conversion of the outer forms and expression, but of the inner spirit and soul.

Nicodemus is a Jew. Not just any Jew, but a Pharisee ... one who is devout and observant. Nicodemus has heard Jesus preach and he has seen the "signs" Jesus has performed. It has raised his curiosity, but he didn't want to risk exposure, so he went to Jesus under cover of darkness. At first Nicodemus just makes a statement: He knows that Jesus must be filled with God's Spirit because of the signs he has performed. Jesus then says to Nicodemus that one must be "born from above" to see God's kingdom. This obviously confuses Nicodemus who hears Jesus' words as if they are literal:

"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus then speaks to Nicodemus in figurative, symbolic language about being born of water and Spirit before entering God's kingdom.

"What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Yet Nicodemus is still confused, so Jesus goes on:

"If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

This is the key moment in the conversation. If Nicodemus is stuck on the literal understanding ... in this case on the words "born again" ... then he will never be able to comprehend the deeper, more spiritual meaning of Jesus' words and teaching.

Obviously, Jesus is not talking about a second physical birth, but rather a spiritual awakening to God's divine presence in one's life. To add to this, the Greek word that is here translated as "believe" is used elsewhere in the New Testament as the word "faith." The Greek word is "credo" from which we have the word "creed." The meaning of this Greek word means more than just giving one's intellectual assent to a proposition ... that is agreeing that something is literally true. Rather, the Greek word has more the meaning of "setting one's heart and soul."

I have been often asked whether I believe the Nicene Creed ... which we will recite later in this service. If the question is, "Do I intellectually agree with every statement being made in the Nicene Creed," the answer is "No." However, if I see the question as "Can I set my heart and soul to affirm the community ... ancient and current ... local and worldwide ... gathered in the name of Jesus ... that is taking seriously what Jesus took seriously?" then the answer is a "Yes." It may sound like semantics, but I think this is what the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is about.

What I hear Jesus saying to Nicodemus is that the truth lies beyond the literal. If you are going to argue the literal interpretation, one way or the other, you will be missing the point.

To Jesus seeing with only eyes, and listening with only ears, and interpreting with only one's mind was equivalent to "perishing." But there is an alternative. And that is being open to God's Spirit. It is seeing with one's heart, and listening with one's soul. When one does that they open the door to what Jesus called "eternal life."

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

This is not just about a Pharisee named Nicodemus ... it is about us also. It is as if our minds become an obstacle to our hearts and souls. Rather than allow for the meaning of the story to enter our life in a powerful spiritual way, we, instead, insulate and protect ourselves from that life changing power by intellectualizing it.

For some people it is defining the orthodoxy of the faith by claiming that it is necessary to read the Bible literally ... that everything in the Bible happened exactly like it says. For others it is to deny any faith claims at all because, for them, the Bible is full of fantastic stories inconsistent with contemporary scientific knowledge or new archaeological evidence.

The same is true with our Creeds, which define what the Church call orthodox faith. For some, intellectually believing the Nicene Creed as literal fact is a litmus test for orthodox faith. Others

tell me that they are not Christians because they don't believe the Nicene Creed is factual. In both cases, this is a literal reading of the Nicene Creed, rather than an understanding of the Nicene Creed as an expression of the community's heart and soul in symbolic language.

There are those who believe that God made the world, and all its inhabitants in six, 24-hour days, and it happened, by their chronology, about 6,000 years ago. They believe there was an actual Garden of Eden, and that the first two human beings were Adam and Eve. There are those who believe that the flood that floated Noah's ark encompassed the entire globe, and that Methuselah lived 900 years.

However, there are others who say that such a literal belief in these events reduces God to a magician, even if it is on a grand scale. For many such a literal belief is hogwash ... that it could not have happened that way and therefore the whole Bible, and the faith that supports it, is suspect.

What I hear Jesus saying to Nicodemus, and to us 2,000 years later, is that the truth lies beyond the literal. If you are going to argue the literal interpretation, one way or the other, you will be missing the point.

In our Hebrew Scriptures this morning we hear the story of the Israelites in the wilderness. Not only did they complain to Moses about not having enough food and water, but they were being bitten by poisonous snakes and dying. God told Moses to make a serpent of bronze and put it on a stick ... obviously before God decided that idols were not a good idea. But Moses was to have those who were bitten by the snakes to look at the serpent and it would save their life. Jesus then uses that story to say that the Son of Man must also be lifted up, and those who believe in him will have eternal life. For some this is a prediction of his death by crucifixion. For others it is about the way Jesus lived his life ... fully as the Son of Man ... and his invitation to others to do the same thereby gaining what John calls "eternal life" and what the other gospels call the "kingdom of God."

We are entering the last leg of our journey through Lent. In just two weeks we will celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and begin our Holy Week which ends in his passion and death on Good Friday. These stories of Jesus' passion are very familiar to us, so familiar that at times we may only listen with one ear and not hear them with our heart. Yet, embedded in the stories are meanings much deeper than the literal facts they tell. Embedded in these stories about Jesus is a story which is our story as well.

I encourage you, in these last days of our Lenten season, to go beyond the literal and open more than just your ears and mind to the accounts we will hear. Whether you believe that they happened just as they are written, or if you have questions about their veracity, is not the issue. Can you find God's Spirit speaking to your heart and your soul? Can you be converted ... transformed ... in such a way that you might find what Jesus called "eternal life?"

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Amen.