

Lent 4
March 14, 2021

**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.**

John 3:16:

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.

For many Christians this verse contains some of the most comforting and reassuring words found in the gospels. It is so often quoted by itself that we don't remember the context of its origin. This morning we heard just a portion that context, but I would like to add more ... it come in a conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus.

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.

How do we know this story to be true in our lives today ... not just in words, but in the depth of our spiritual experience over this past year? It was one year ago today that we began our shutdown at St. Cyprian's because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We all know what has happened during this past year, and it was much more than just the horror of COVID-19 with the isolating illness, and the shocking number of deaths. This past year we lived with our isolation from one another, there were the staggering economic consequences of the shutdown, then the killing of George Floyd and the rise of Black Lives Matter, a presidential election, an insurrection at our Capitol. However, all the changes in our lives didn't just happen out there, they happened within this community of faith, and they happened to each and everyone of you in your hearts and souls.

A year ago, I addressed what I thought we were about to face ... this is part of what I had to say then:

We are living in uncertain times. But, so did Jesus. He lived in uncertain times and he found a way to fully live in the image of God throughout his journey to the cross. I often use the phrase, "taking seriously what Jesus took seriously." Most of the time I am using it in reference to Jesus' sense of justice ... accepting those deemed unacceptable by others. But, how might taking seriously what Jesus took seriously apply to our situation today, and to our inner life that we depend upon in these troubling times?

First of all ... and most importantly of all ... Jesus took seriously his relationship with God. Not only did Jesus fully live in the presence of God, God was fully alive in Jesus. Jesus knew he was a blessed child of God ... that God's Spirit had alighted on him and entered his whole being ... and he lived his life in this perpetual awareness with deep trust.

Jesus experienced that blessing at his baptism. God was upon and within him. Then the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Yet, Jesus was fully aware of living in God's presence ... and God's presence was alive in Jesus ... in those very difficult times. Jesus was most fully aware of living in God's presence when he went to the cross. And, God was fully present in Jesus as he suffered and died.

So, taking seriously what Jesus took seriously ... in times like this ... means taking seriously our relationship to the divine presence of God in our lives. It means living as if we are blessed children of a loving God, and that the loving God of all creation is alive in us just as God was alive in Jesus.

How do we do that? Let's look at what Jesus did, and what he took seriously. Jesus grounded himself in prayer. Whenever he was troubled, he found a solitary place and prayed. He didn't have a Prayer Book, but he did have his Holy Scriptures, and I'm sure he used them. His prayers came from his heart and soul ... honestly ... in language beyond language.

Remember, these are the words I preached a year ago.

So, if we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously we will pray. Our Book of Common Prayer says, "Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with and

without words.” Your prayer is your prayer. Find God in your life and then respond. Find God in the surprise blessings you see in the world around you. Find God in the things that scare you. Then respond to God by thought and/or by deed. Respond with or without words in any language or non-language you have. Just pray ... it will ground you.

Jesus also took seriously the people around him. He took his disciples seriously. He took the Pharisees and Sadducees seriously. But, he also took seriously those who were all but invisible to others.

So, as we take seriously what Jesus took seriously ... even in the most dire of times ... remember the people around you and take them seriously. Be especially mindful of those who we sometimes take for granted ... the checkout clerk at the supermarket, the gas station attendant stuck behind a counter, the wait-staff person turned food-delivery person, and others. Open your eyes to see those who are often invisible ... the persons we avoid seeing ... those to whom we are often blind.

So, in this uncertain and unsettling time, trust in God’s presence in which you live, and trust that God’s presence lives in you. Pray by responding to where you find God in your life, and take seriously the people in your world and beyond ... and let them know you take them seriously.

Those were my words from a year ago, and I stand by those words today ... one year after we shutdown ... as I did then. You ... the people of this community of faith ... lived into that spiritual discipline I described, and it allowed this congregation to respond to the crisis of this past year with healthy maturity. Yes, we have had a year of YouTube services, Zoom meetings, To-Go bags for Dining With Dignity, drive-by distribution of boxes of food at the Ecumenical Food Panty, and very limited pastoral visits from me and Pastor Deena.

However, you have been generous beyond expectation, and creative in the midst of horrible confusion. You took seriously the call to pray ... for yourselves, for this congregation, for our city, state and nation, and for the world. You responded to the needs of others with amazing generosity ... generosity of spirit as well as the generosity to help the hungry, unemployed, and those living on the edge of homelessness.

I attribute that generosity and creativity to a new consciousness of faith ... another way of experiencing the holy and sacred ... a fresh approach to taking seriously what Jesus took seriously ... a deeper understanding of the way God’s Spirit works in our lives.

This is where the story of Jesus and Nicodemus intersects with our lives over this past year. Nicodemus was stuck in the literal ... the practical ... the pragmatic ... and he failed to see the spiritual opportunity right in front of him.

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

Nicodemus was a Pharisee ... one who was extremely devout and observant. Nicodemus heard Jesus preach and he saw the “signs” Jesus performed. These raised his curiosity, but Nicodemus didn’t want to risk exposure, so he went to Jesus under cover of darkness ... darkness, a symbol of his lack of spiritual insight.

At first Nicodemus just made a statement ... he knew that Jesus must have been filled with God’s Spirit because of the signs he performed. Jesus responded to Nicodemus by telling him that one must be “born from above” to see God’s kingdom. This obviously confused Nicodemus who heard Jesus’ words as if they were literal:

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

Yet Jesus challenged the literal with 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 was still confused, so Jesus went 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 was the key moment in the conversation. If Nicodemus was stuck on the literal understanding ... in this case on the words “born again” ... then he would never be able to comprehend the deeper, more spiritual meaning of Jesus’ words and teaching.

Obviously, Jesus was not talking about a second physical birth, but rather a spiritual awakening to God’s divine presence in one’s life ... a new spiritual consciousness. 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” as if one is entering an experience of faith, not just talking about it.

What I hear Jesus saying to Nicodemus is that the spiritual 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.” However, Jesus offers an alternative ... 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 at times 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.

However, what I have heard from you, and observed in your prayers of thoughts and deeds, is that your response to the events of this past year were more than just practical, pragmatic choices of behavior. Rather, there has been a spiritual awakening ... a shifting of consciousness ... an openness to God's Spirit in your lives that you were unaware of before. It was much more than just being safe and responsible ... it was a living your lives as if God was alive in you ... just as God was alive in Jesus.

To Jesus seeing with only eyes, and listening with only ears, and interpreting with only one's mind was equivalent to "perishing." Focusing on just the pragmatic needs of the world ... even in the midst of this pandemic and Black Lives Matter and an insurrection is not enough. The alternative is being open to God's Spirit at the same time. It is seeing with one's heart, and listening with one's soul. When one does that it opens 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."

We are entering the last leg of our journey through Lent. On Easter Sunday we will celebrate the Resurrection by ending this shutdown and begin meeting again for in-person worship ... with limitations and restrictions ... but worshipping in-person again.

I encourage you, in these last days of our Lenten season, to continue to go beyond the literal and practical and pragmatic and open more than just your ears and mind to the world around you and in you. Be intentional. Reflect upon this past year as a wilderness experience ... a year-long Lent ... and recall where you have experienced God coming alive within you. Where did you find God's Spirit speaking to your heart and your soul? When were you converted ... transformed ... open to a new spiritual consciousness in such a way that you began to 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.