

Lent IV Year B 2009

Texts: Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light” John 3:19

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Every so often the people that put the lectionary together drop us off in the middle of the story. They just plop us down in the middle of a conversation. For me, it is like coming into a movie just a few minutes late only to discover by the end of the movie that had I been there from the very beginning I would have understood the plot a lot better than I did. It is as if those first few minutes define the rest of the two hours.

Today’s Gospel reading is an example of coming in a little late to a story and missing the crucial first few minutes. So, let me bring you up to speed.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jewish community comes to Jesus under cover of darkness. He wants to know more about this young man but he understands that to inquire publicly could cause some real problems for him. He is trying to figure Jesus out. He has seen the things that Jesus has done and knows that there is something very special about him, that he has God’s presence surrounding him.

Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about being born again. Nicodemus tries to understand Jesus’ words literally. He can’t figure out how he can go back into the womb and be born a second time. I can just see Nicodemus scratching or pulling at his long beard, with a quizzical look on his face trying to make sense out of what Jesus is telling him.

Jesus says to Nicodemus “very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Nicodemus is still stumped by the second birth part of what Jesus is trying to communicate. He is still caught up in the physical aspect of birth when

Jesus is speaking about the spiritual aspect of coming alive in God's presence.

Nicodemus is wrestling with large questions, questions about belief and faith and how one comes to both. He is wrestling with questions about what life is really all about. It is into this conversation that we are dropped and it is a very important conversation if we are to understand the context in which our Gospel text resides.

Jesus reminds Nicodemus about the time the Israelites were wandering around in the desert whining about what they did and did not have, what food they liked and didn't like. I always have this picture in my mind of Moses telling them, "Eat your Manna! It's good for you! There are people back in Egypt that are starving!"

Anyway, as we heard in today's Old Testament reading poisonous snakes were biting the Israelites. Moses talks to God about the situation and God tells him to make a bronze snake, put it on a pole and to lift it up so that the people may see it and live. To this day the symbol of the healing professions is a serpent on a pole, known as a Caduceus.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that just as the Israelites were to gaze upon that symbol lifted up on a pole so that they may live, Jesus would be lifted up on a pole as well and it would be gazing upon his death, which in the Gospel of John always stands for Jesus' glory, that would transform and heal God's people. To be lifted up was not just to be tied to the cross but also to be exalted, praised. One could not be done without the other. John tells us time and time and time again that cross and crown cannot be separated.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that out of God's love for the world, out of God's desire for all his creation to have eternal life, he sent his Son. It was God's desire to save his creation, not condemn it. In John's gospel, eternal life is not a quantity; it is not an "endless duration of existence."¹ Rather, it is a quality, a way of describing life as lived in the continuing presence of God. For John eternal life is lived now, not later. It is present tense not future.

¹ New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Vol. IX p. 552

Jesus tells us that living in the knowledge and love of God versus the way we currently live is as different as night and day, as different as living in a light that illumines everything and helps us see clearly and live fully, or living in darkness where we can't see and where living is a mere shadow of what God wants for us.

Many of you know that before becoming a priest I worked in the field of visual rehabilitation. I spent 20 years working with people who had lost their sight and lived in a world of varying shades of gray and darkness. As a result of that experience John's use of contrast of light and dark, blindness versus seeing really resonates with me.

I will never forget one gentleman in his 50's. He had been a South Vietnamese army officer in the 1960's and 70's. One day he was captured by the North Vietnamese and put into an underground prison where he stayed for over two years. No light penetrated his dungeon, which was really no more than a small storm cellar with room only for him. I don't know how far underground he was held. I do know that food was shoved through a tunnel and that for two years this man lived in complete darkness.

As a result of living without any light he became completely blind, which in medical jargon is known as NLP, which stands for No Light Perception. The lack of light stimulation made his rods and cones, those parts of the eye responsible for transmitting light to the brain, which is the organ that does the actual seeing, degenerate. Light that was shone in this man's eyes, regardless of how bright, could not be detected and did not register on any visual test or brain scan.

Think about that for a moment; being put in a cell with no light, no seeing, for so long that when we are returned to the light, it doesn't matter. What a tragedy that is, and yet, as Jesus tells us, that is the tragedy we choose, repeatedly because we have come to love the darkness more than the light, we have come to love the way we want to live more than the way God wants us to live.

There is a real danger in insisting on living in the darkness. There is a real danger to losing whatever ability we have of discerning the Light that is life in Jesus. There is danger that when we choose to stay in the darkness, that those parts of us that recognize the divine degenerate and

die and the love of God in Jesus no longer registers in whatever soul we have left.

I remember reading in high school the play No Exit by the French existential philosopher Jean Paul Sartre. In it he claims that the human condition, how we live, is like being trapped in a room from which there is no escape. Just like my client's imprisonment, the human condition which is sinful, locks us up, keeps us constrained in a small, confined space that doesn't allow us to grow and live as fully as we were made to live.

To be condemned is to be confined. To be condemned is to have a power over you that insists that you be less than what you were made for. Far too often, we place being condemned on God's shoulders when in actuality we condemn ourselves to that existence.

Jesus tells us that he was sent not to condemn the world but to save the world. The word "save" is really interesting. It is a Greek translation of the Hebrew, which means, "to bring into an open space."

Imagine that! Imagine finding that the door to the room from which we think there is no escape is really locked from the inside. And then imagine what awaits us when we finally realize that we can unlock that door. Imagine opening the door that is keeping us in darkness and finding there the most beautiful, expansive, open space that God has provided for us in which to truly live. And then, imagine taking that first tentative step into the Light, into the loving and saving arms of Christ.

The Christian belief is not that sin is something from which there is no exit, no escape. The Christian belief is that faith in Jesus provides the open door that allows us a way to move from being imprisoned to being set free, from being dead to living fully and abundantly as was God's intention from the very beginning of creation.

That is the meaning of being saved. That is the meaning of the Good News of God in Christ. That is the message that Jesus was trying to convey to Nicodemus and it is the same message that Jesus wants us to hear.

Darkness or Light? Imprisonment or freedom? Death or life? The choice is ours.

Amen.