

Numbers 21:4-9 ~ John 3:14-17
Again & Again, God Loves First
 4th Sunday in Lent ~ March 14, 2021
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Introduction to Gospel Text:

I hope you brought your flashlights. Or your cell phones with their flashlight function on. The gospel text you are about to hear, parachutes us right into the middle of a very dark story that is well underway at the point we enter it. Yes, we're still in John, still in Jerusalem during the Passover, only inches past the ruckus Jesus caused in the Temple in last week's lesson. The scene is literally dark because it takes place at night. And because we are in John, the land of sign and metaphor, it's not just night. The night stands for the darkness within and all around us: our fears, our brokenness. Our separation from God. Our sin.

This was the night that Nicodemus first came to Jesus, curious about this Rabbi and his signs. They were starting to stack up and word of his power was beginning to spread. He was curious, but also cautious and questioning. Jesus had answers, but not the ones he was expecting. We are told Nicodemus was astonished by what Jesus told him, about what it means to be born of the spirit.

Seeing the confusion growing on Nicodemus' face perhaps, Jesus takes a different tack and brings up a story, the one from Numbers you just heard. Jesus knew this would have been well known by Nicodemus, who was a religious leader, Pharisee, well-verse in the stories of their shared faith. The story could serve as a reference point, common ground and understanding between them. This story would have also been familiar to the audience of Jewish Christians to whom this gospel was first addressed in the late first century. Sort of like the stories in our USA history we have all heard about, like Paul Revere's horse ride, or Rosa Park's bus ride.

From there, spoiler alert, Jesus whips out a verse that may be your favorite. John 3:16. Today we get to listen to it in context, now with our flashlights on and our hearts open, let's see if we can understand ever more deeply what Jesus meant.

Sermon:

I went away last night more confused, than when I went in. Me, Nicodemus, the answer man. Listening to Jesus made me feel things, consider things in a whole different light than I ever had before.

We are born Jews. We were given laws to follow through Moses, beginning with the Ten Words God gave us at Mt. Sinai. I am someone who follows those commandments and it is my business to make sure other people do. But his way of talking about it confused me at first. I couldn't make sense of it, really. He kept saying words like everyone and anyone. Since when did we see everyone the same way? Since when did everyone have a chance for eternal life? And did I hear him suggest that eternal life that starts now, while we are living? A sign that we are born of

Spirit, as he put it? Something that starts not with our physical birth, but with a spiritual birth or rebirthing?

I started to wonder if we were talking about the same God. But then he brought up that story about Moses leading our people in the wilderness and what happened with the serpent. Those poisonous creeping, slithering reptiles were biting and killing our people and then God had Moses make a bronze serpent, set it up on a pole so when someone got bit by a serpent, all they would have to do is look at the bronze serpent and live. A snake to cure a snake bite, always seemed odd. But the "Son of Man" must be lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness? What was that about?

Was Jesus claiming to be the Son of Man? The Messiah? Born into our darkness? Just to be "lifted up" on a pole like the serpent? That was too much for me. I had to bolt. I was losing it. But of course, I kept my cool on the outside. Nodded my head. Stopped talking, in case he would trip me up again and left under the cover of night.

But my mind has been racing, ever since. I couldn't sleep. What kind of God would become a human being? And someone so common, so ordinary, so small town. Sure, we are commanded to love God with all our heart, and soul, and strength. But what kind of love would make God, our earth-creating, red-sea splitting, manna from heaven making, water from the rock breaking God, decide to become one of us? What way of love, what manner of love, is that?

Now let's take a leap. I have another scene to show you that you may have seen before. It is also a dark scene. It is something like Nicodemus coming by night to see Jesus. But it's young Luke Skywalker, in the Star War movie, The Empire Strikes Back, where Yoda is training him to become a Jedi. And Luke gets scared about the dark side of the Force. He does not want to face it. Knowing what good and what evil can get tricky. Let's have a look...

They are running through the dark night, Yoda on his shoulders. Luke hesitates when he looks at the dark cave. "There's something not right...I feel cold." Yoda gestures in the direction of the cave, "That place is strong with the dark side of the Force. A domain of evil it is...And you must go. "What is in there?" "Only what you take with you." Carl Jung's wisdom lines up with Jesus' and Yoda. Jung puts it like this: "The cave you fear to enter holds that treasure you seek." Jesus has much to teach us (much more than Yoda or Carl Jung) if we choose to enter the cave, the belly of the beast, the darkness.

According to the Gospel of John, the only gospel where Nicodemus appears, he makes his way slowly from his tunnel of confusion into the light. In chapter 7, Nicodemus suggests to his peers that Jesus be given a hearing before they arrest him. But not until after Jesus has been crucified, in John 19, does Nicodemus come out of the shadows to assist Joseph of Arimathea in the preparing of Jesus body for burial.

What about us? How long will we resist the transforming power of Jesus, playing it safe, dancing on the edges of full-throttle faith-led living. Are you being called to take the next step

into a deeper walk with Jesus? A step that might call us to change the way we look at others, the world and ourselves? Are we ready to accept the invitation to become full participants in the abundant life that Jesus offers? What does FPC need to change to become an ever more brilliant beacon of light and hope in the world today?

Yes, it is true: For God so loved this world. How so? By loving us first and gifting us with God's unique Son, to be with us in our darkness, to go where toxic venom can turn into the wine of lifegiving forgiveness and grace. Where what seems like an absolute dead end, surprisingly opens up a new path. Whether it's in our own self-understanding, or in a relationship snarl or tangle that resists resolution. That resolution becomes like heaven on earth for us. God is also calling us to enter the belly of the beast of sin sick racism, life-crushing economic disparities, rancorous political division, and even the ecological truth about our dying planet. Jesus came to save us from, not condemn us for these sins. Jesus came so we don't have to keep making the same mistakes over and over. In the darkness with Jesus, we can be healed, made better than ever before. So that we can join in Jesus' saving work.

How can we possibly believe this? We can "be-love" this because God loved this world enough to enter it as one of us. God loved and loves this world enough to become a human being who got thirsty and tired, who wept bitterly, who felt abandoned and utterly alone as he hung on the cross, lifted up. Not for just some of us. But for all of us. And not just for human beings, but for all of creation. Does that sound too big and too deep to get your mind around? That's a good sign we are hearing what Jesus was telling Nicodemus about that night.

If you are feeling alone or lost, discouraged or depressed, if you barely made it here this morning and are wondering how you will make it through the rest of this day. I have good news for you: Jesus is with us in our darkness, ready—not to squeeze our hand, but to take our hand, to lead us into a new life, a new lease on life, a new way of looking at our life. A new way of looking at our broken, hurting world. Again & again, no matter how many times it takes.

I would like to close my sermon by leading us in a prayer, which is one of my most favorite Taize songs. I invite you to repeat each phrase after me:

Lord Jesus Christ, Your light shines within us,

Let not my doubts, Nor my darkness

Speak to me.

Lord Jesus Christ, Your light shines within us,

Let my heart, Always welcome

Your love.