

#17 10-11

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalms 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-21

God Loves The World

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He 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." 3Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4Nicodemus 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?" 5Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8The 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." 9Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11"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. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16"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. 17"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. [For me, however, the text goes on beyond what is written in the bulletins] 18Those 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. 19And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21But 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."

I included the last 4 verses because they help highlight this scene so well. Nicodemus slips under the cloak of darkness into the place where Jesus is staying. The theme of light versus darkness is often played out in the Gospel of John, and here we have a man portrayed practically creeping around in the dark and Jesus' last words in this text are, "21But 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."

Confusion seems to surround this poor man - sneaking in the darkness to be told about the light, being told to be born again and he takes it literally . . . he doesn't come across as being the brightest light bulb on the string. The illiterate Samaritan woman at the well caught on about living water far quicker than Nick does here about being born of the Spirit! And this is a learned man - a man of position and authority and wealth!

This text has taken a beating over the centuries. It seems to be used quite often as a litmus test - "Are you born again?" If you can't say yes immediately, then "buzz" - you fail! No matter what you thought about your relationship with God, we are going to say you don't really have one - or what you have isn't good enough.

But that is under no circumstances what Jesus was ever intending in this text. Jesus was so desiring to help Nicodemus, and those of us to still hear his words today, to understand what a life in God is all about.

We are all born and those around us have great hopes for our futures. But no one can have a relationship with God for us. That we have to do for ourselves - and we do so when we take on responsibility for our own lives. That is when we become fully ourselves. We become more than our bodies - we become integrated into the whole of our being and in this world around us. We are initiated into the world around us as full partners. We develop our souls, and that is a much harder task than when we were born.

When someone gave birth to us, we took no efforts in the matter. We were pushed or pulled or whatever until we emerged. Birth was done to us - not from us. Our faith is our own choice, of our own efforts - and in spite of how

glorious it may seem – it usually is a series of decisions, struggles, challenges, losses, pains and joys which bring us into a committed spiritual relationship with God.

That is one reason the Disciples support Believer's Baptism – being baptized when you can know for yourself that you are ready to take the responsibility of living a life of faith in the light for all to see. For those of us whose baptism discussion was made for us – the confirmation became important – that was our born again moment.

Some people have had profound experiences of the holy that they can point to and say – “THAT was my born again conversion moment.” But most Christians have numerous small quiet ones that brought us gently from the darkness into the light.

Another part of this text gets lost often. I remember having to memorize it in Catechism classes, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16. It is one of the most widely quoted verses from the Christian Bible, and has been called the most famous Bible verse. It has also been called the “Gospel in a nutshell”

We see these sometimes on posters at assemblies where well intended people want to change the minds of their opponents on some issue. It has been used often as a weapon, a threat, a judgment against those who think differently that the bearer of the sign, as though to say, “Because you think differently than I on this issue, you need to get right with God.”

Again, not the love that Jesus was hoping to share with the world. The truth is being said, time and time again, God does not hate this world – God created this world and loves this world, and Jesus is telling us to rise above the animal brain primal base way of thinking and rise into the light of love and hope and trust and faith – things of the spirit.

Yes, Lent is a time of repentance and a time of contemplation. But we aren't being asked to hide back into the depths of the darkness and hide away or point fingers at others. God sent his son to the earth – to physically love and heal and teach and forgive – not to punish. Jesus went to the cross to protect those he was in charge of. Rather than let the whole crown of followers get embroiled in a civil war like they are having in the Middle East right now, he stepped forward so their lives would be spared – so that they could continue on teaching and loving and healing, because that is what God wants us to learn about our powerful creator – that he (or she) loves us.

So shed any guilt or shame that you may have lingering because someone somewhere made you feel that maybe your faith wasn't good enough. Grace connects us to God and to each other. Jesus' message to Nicodemus is that in order to boldly come out of the dark of night and step into the full life with God, we have to love God more than we fear our sins. It is an act of great courage to seek those places in our hearts and in our darkest past that scare us, due to what we may find of our own participation in the sin.

In psychotherapy with many adults who were abused as children, one of the greatest challenges is to help that person remember what happened. And one of the reasons for this is that often the child believes they deserved whatever they got, and don't want to face their guilt because it was so overwhelming as a small child who wasn't capable of dealing with the power of the 'grown-up' abusing them.

In going back to the painful childhood experience, the adult can sometimes see for the first time that they were innocent and it was wrong what happened to them. That can be a tremendously freeing enlightening experience. What was lost in the shadow and mingled with fear and shame, the truth – the light of God – comes forth and that person can be freed of their pain if they continue to keep their feelings in the light and work with the truth.

This is one reason why Lent and time of reflection and repentance are so important. Because sometimes what seems to be holding us back from the joy and the life with God is not our sin, but the sins we carry from someone else – and Jesus Christ already did that for us. Repentance – freedom – light – love – GOD LOVES THIS WORLD! Let us strive to love it back as best as we can. AMEN