

John 3:14-21

Lent...a time of repentance, sacrifice and yes even decisions...choices and actions. We are here in Jerusalem this morning and its nighttime...it's dark.

This crisis of decision is fleshed out here in a covert conversation with the Rabbi and Pharisee Nicodemus.

The lectionary today pulls a snippet of a conversation with Jesus and Nicodemus... Read it in its entirety...it's good stuff!

And by the way, that's who Jesus is talking to here...not His disciples or the crowds but a teacher of the law who is open to hearing Jesus out...but notice Nicodemus approaches Jesus in the dead of night (in the dark) so no one will see him!

Now this conversation is juxtaposed with Jesus' conversation earlier with the Samaritan Woman at the well, who any good Jew would be embarrassed to be seen with...see Jesus had a conversation with her in the center of her village out in broad daylight (the light)...and his disciples were embarrassed! And here Nicodemus doesn't want to be embarrassed by being seen with this radical teacher Jesus.

Now earlier in the conversation Nicodemus is confused because Jesus tells him he must be born again...which translates as born a new in the Spirit of God. In this week's lectionary we only see part of Jesus' answer to Nicodemus... focusing here on trusting in God and gaining life eternal...a life worth living.

Using a classic rabbinical argument, He sends Nicodemus back to the Torah, which any good teacher of Israel would know by heart.

Jesus recalls the story of a plague of poisonous snakes that were threatening the Israelites. The anti-venom was to look at a bronze snake that Moses lifted up on a "pole". Now in Greek, the word for the "pole"

is also the word for a sign...a big play on words here as signs are important throughout the entirety of John's gospel!

Next a transition in the narrative occurs...we go from the singular YOU to the plural... You and I together now see the sign...Jesus is now upon a pole...the sign...the cross!

And His death will not end in defeat will it... but rather it will become the moment of God's triumph...and like the serpent raised up on the pole to heal God's people...the pole that Jesus is raised upon is the cross...and all those who look to Jesus to be saved by God will in turn be healed.

In a paradox... the mystery of God revealed comes at the very moment of Jesus' death...which then leads us into a new life in Christ ...and we call this transformation...this state of being... resurrection and eternal life. Paul called it a Metamorphosis!

In today's gospel we also have John 3:16... One of the best known verses in the Bible. "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".

Most people know John 3:16 but most of us may not associate it within the context of this exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Read as a whole, John 3:16 becomes the summary for Nicodemus and for people like him...and people like us, who believe they know Jesus and who come to him not to be turned upside down, or changed or transformed... but rather to just have their current opinions and beliefs confirmed by Jesus.

Read in its entirety, this passage is less about realizing that our faith rests upon OUR knowledge and convictions...our beliefs... but rather it is in God's love for us through Jesus that will always transform us in some way.

God so loved the world... the Greek word “so” here means “just so”!
 We could translate this verse as “This is the way God loved the world, with the result that He gave his only Son, in order that whoever trusts in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

The most important thing to notice about this verse is that God loved the world... the world that God created! And God longs for God’s creation to live and thrive.

And it is not only God’s own people whom God will save, as in the Old Testament story... but the entire world...the Greek word here for world is Cosmos... meaning everything...all that is!

The gospel proclaims God’s extravagant love for the entire cosmos! Not just for Jews or Christians or anyone else. And this love is a self-giving act of grace. God giving... God-Self... for God’s creation.

So is God just providing this extravagant love for only those who believe in Him? That’s how a lot of us take this verse...But John’s gospel tells us that God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it but to redeem it.

Gods’ goal here is reconciliation between God and God’s creation.

Being separate and then made whole once again. We are living this now aren’t we...we are living Lent in action!

For example, Covid separated us all...We were isolated and separated from the whole of our communities. How did that make you feel?

For the extroverts among us it was probably unbearable. But for all of us I think there was and still is a low-grade depression to some degree... especially if we became “stuck” in our separateness...our disconnectedness!

Though some people noted the opposite happened didn’t they...being at home with family had actually connected them more and they actually

felt more whole... whereas previously their work and circumstances may have separated them from their families. Interesting isn't it!

The question is How do we connect...how do we reconcile? How do we become whole?

Look at the news or your internet or FB feeds and our current political climate... are they helping us to reconcile and connect to the cosmos...or are they furthering our division and separateness? FB was originally created to connect us to family and friends not separate us and divide us?!

Yet we all see customized feeds which feeds only our particular point of view of the world...it's about clicks, and money and we are the product!

But for all our circumstances and viewpoints... we get to choose don't we? We get to choose our own shared... or separate reality...our state of being.

It's never God rejecting us, is it...but in effect it is we who reject God...and the teachings of Jesus taught us to reconcile with God and one another.

And though many different faiths and denominations may argue over who's right and who's wrong... or who's in and who's out...who's saved and who isn't! I'm here to tell you that no matter what your faith or denomination... it is ultimately up to us whether we connect with all of creation or whether we just choose to isolate ourselves from it all.

In America we are ever surrounded by Selfishness due to our focus on individualism...me and my own...my way of thinking...my groups...in other words...my beliefs...my feelings...my limited view of the world then becomes reality!

My limited view of an unlimited God becomes God for me (my personal savior).

How can we limit the love of a God who is willing to give everything for us and for creation...including God's self on a cross as God's son!

Wouldn't you do the same for your own families? How much love would it take for you to not only sacrifice yourself, but to sacrifice something you loved even more than yourself...like your only child for the sake of the world?

So when folks argue over who's saved and who's not... it really is quite simple to tell ...Do you put you and your own above the needs of the world? Do you value money and possessions above people and the planet? Do you judge others as not being saved while not looking in the mirror at yourself?

This stuff isn't hard is it... but it goes against our selfish nature...we like to hide our own selfishness and ego behind our religion and rules so that we never have to face ourselves. We come in the darkness as Nicodemus does to confront our own limited views of God as He did.

The reason the scriptures don't give us some handy dandy list of formulas for salvation is because at one level we may all be the same... but when it comes to our own egos and experiences we are all different.

Remember Jesus did not give the John 3:16 spiel to his own followers and the public...only to Nicodemus.

So Jesus comes to us...He's available to us anytime...day or night... Jesus meets us where we are and extends that mirror to each one of us.

Chances are if you despise something in someone else...look in the mirror and you will see some of that shadow inside of you as well.

Now that's not to say that we shouldn't speak up and act out against the inequality and injustices we see against one another and our planet. That is our God given duty as stewards...

But don't take on ministry unless you are also honest and self-aware of your own shortfalls and prejudices...we all have them...just some of us can't see them... or choose not to.

The Son of man does not just offer us life... but life eternal...for those who believe. And for John the word "believe" is an action...it is something that you do...you trust in God and in God's love and then you let the Spirit move you into action... as an active partner in redeeming the world. That's where the rubber meets the road...and through your own transformation you will gain a life worth living...

Being born a new and believing means being connected with God... where God...through the Spirit...is born in new ways through you and me...that's where we become radical, and political, and focused on social justice for the entire world.

Now we're talking - eternal life! And this eternal life, this unending life lived in the presence of God, now and forever, is a life shaped by, and dependent upon God's love for us in all its wondrous and mysterious ways.

It is not simply life in some distant heaven after death. It begins now...the moment that we trust and give our lives to Christ and to God's goal of reconciling the cosmos.

When we receive eternal life, we enter into God's kingdom here and now... WE become citizens of heaven...submitting to "God's will to be done on earth" ...and this leads us to a life focused on actions that bring wholeness to our world in using your unique talents and gifts.

And Citizenship in God's kingdom will never be a solo affair. We are only whole when we are connected to others...We are born into God's Holy Family... a community here we call the church!

And birth into this reality does not come from our knowledge or convictions... and John 3:16 is not a statement about the correctness of our faith or what we have to believe in...sorry to say that a tattoo, or a bumper sticker or your mental tenacity isn't gonna do it here!

Here with Nicodemus... and throughout all of John's gospel ...being born from above (think kingdom of heaven) and believing (think trust) are NOT done with the mind... but rather done with the heart (the Levav – the center of our center)...it is a “state of being” that we live out every day!

John's gospel IS the Gospel of transformation... believing and doing are inseparable...you are either in Christ or you are not...and YOU get to choose... You choose this by how you live your life everyday in every situation by your actions!

Jesus invites us to open our imaginations and reconsider our relationship with God. Jesus invites all of us Nicodemus's to come into the light...and by the way Nicodemus eventually does get it later on in John's gospel...in fact and he gets at the cross.

So we are all invited this Lent to be full participants into this new and abundant life which Jesus offers to us all... through our own transformations... beings born of the Spirit... living in everlasting life...today...tomorrow... and always.

Your faithful servant,

carmen