

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

John 3:14-21

Lent is the time, when we as a church, are reminded of our own sinful nature and humanity. It is a time when we remember that we will return to the dust and ashes that we were formed from.

It is a time to reclaim our dependence upon the God that gives us life.

The Gospel story today reminds us that this great divide that stands between us and God, is one that we are all familiar with.

It is perhaps the most popular in the entire Bible and concerns the very essence of the Christian faith.

Our Gospel reading today is about a man on a journey, much like the Lenten journey we are now on together. His name was Nicodemus and, like us, he was questioning his own mortality and sinful nature. He, too, was seeking the kingdom of God.

Under the cover of night, we find that Nicodemus, a Jewish Rabbi, has come to question Jesus about the miracles that he has performed. The writer of John's Gospel made sure to tell us he came at night. It signifies that Nicodemus, is in the dark, literally. He doesn't understand.

This is on purpose, because in John's Gospel he is referred to, not just as teacher, but "the teacher", pointing to his religious authority. If anyone should know the truth about God and God's people, surely it would be Nicodemus. Yet, for all of his wisdom, Nicodemus is in the dark. Although he recognizes that there is a great divide between himself and God, he does not know how to reconcile that distance. It is ironic that this man,

perhaps the most educated of all the Pharisees, has to go to Jesus and ask him to explain his teachings.

Jesus responds, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from, or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

And, true to form, Nicodemus misunderstands yet again. He is still in the dark. So Jesus has to explain it to him. That's what we have here in this passage from John's Gospel for today.

Jesus makes God's extraordinary plan for the world plain enough for anyone to understand, even this bumbling character, Nicodemus, who by the world standards is brilliant, but by God's standards is still very much in the dark.

We are left wondering whether or not Nicodemus ever understood what it is that Jesus was trying to tell him. We really do not know. But, thankfully, our Gospel writer gives us the story so that we might step out of the darkness ourselves.

Jesus made it plain to Nicodemus, over and over again, but he never quite seemed to get it. Why is it that such a brilliant man, the teacher of teachers, couldn't understand such a simple concept? The best that some Bible commentators can come up with is that it was just too plain. It was just too simple for Nicodemus to get. And that was a problem because the Pharisees had taken all of God's gifts that had been given to the people, and made them extraordinarily complicated. God's gift that was given to the people had been hijacked by the religious leaders. Now, when Jesus came to give it back to the people, it was so pure and simple that the religious leaders could not even

get their heads around the simple concept of God's grace. The story is a story of irony. God's chosen people, the teacher of all the teachers, the greatest of the great, are simply in the dark. And, as amusing as the irony actually is, it serves a greater purpose for us hearing this reading today.

It serves as a warning, a caution sign. It serves to remind us not to go down the same path. Like the Pharisee, we like to make the Gospel more complicated than what God ever intended it to be for us. In our attempts to grow in our religion, it is possible to completely lose sight of our faith. They are two different things. Religion, Anglicanism for example, serves as a vehicle to keep us focused on our faith in Jesus Christ. Anglicanism serves as a theological lens that we view God through, and agree how to share our lives together, because of how Christ shared his life with us. But, Anglicanism, like any religion, in and of itself is nothing. It's like a light bulb without the electricity. A car without the gas. A motor without a boat. The form remains, but in and of itself it is useless. In and of itself, religion is meaningless. And that is where the Pharisees were, they had lost track of God and were serving a religion.

We are capable of doing the exact same thing. It's possible to get so swept up in activities, committee meetings, music, even the worship service itself, and forget what we are here for. We are here as Christ's body, redeemed by his blood. And that is not just good news, that is *the* Good News. Jesus told us that "God so loved the world that he sent his only Son." It doesn't say that God liked the world, or felt sorry for the world, or had a warm fuzzy feeling about the world, it says that God "so loved the world." Don't forget that the world is us.

All it takes to receive the gift is to ask for it. It really is that simple. It's called grace. That's why Nicodemus missed it. He

tried to make it a lot more complicated than it really was. That is why a lot of people today show up week after week and never receive the gift that God has already given to them. They have not received because they fail to ask.

The basis of our faith is not complicated. It was never meant to be. Through Jesus Christ, God took the gift of his Spirit away from the religious leaders and gave it back to the people, where it was meant to be all along. He did this as a gift to us. The question always as been and still remains, will we receive his gift?

AMEN.