

SERMON 4th Sunday of Lent March 14, 2021 **10 A.M.**

Collect: GRACIOUS FATHER, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us and we in him, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Lessons: Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians: 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

The Sermon: In today's Gospel we find Jesus in Jerusalem for a Passover celebration. It is the beginning of his ministry. He has been baptized by John the Baptist, emerged from 40 days in the wilderness where he dealt with the temptations of Satan and has had the episode where he drove the money changers and sellers out of the temple. He has also gone to the wedding at Cana where he turned the water into wine.

We now find him discussing his ministry with Nicodemus. Nicodemus is one of the religious authorities who governs the religious and social life of the Israelites. He is a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin Council.

The Romans allowed the Sanhedrin to have autonomy and authority over the Israelites. They were in charge of the religious, civil, criminal and judicial

affairs of the people. This to a degree kept the Roman conquerors out of their business.

Nicodemus had great authority, he also had a great curiosity about Jesus and wanted to know who he was. The Council had been talking about Jesus and wondering what to do about him since the chaos he caused in the temple. Nicodemus didn't want other Council members to know of his fascination with Jesus.

Nicodemus came secretly at night to meet and talk with Jesus. The Council had agreed that Jesus was a rabbi, inspired by God. But they didn't know where he got the authority to do the miracles he was doing. Jesus told Nicodemus that could not see the kingdom of God unless he was born again. Nicodemus asked, in astonishment, how can I an old man be born again? Is it possible for me, at this stage of my life, to enter my mother's womb and be born again?

Nicodemus was thinking in human terms, Jesus was speaking in spiritual terms. He was telling Nicodemus he had to make some changes in the way he thought of his faith and accept some different ideas about the relationship with God and the kingdom of God.

Jesus then challenges Nicodemus, he tells him the wind blows where it wants to, you hear it, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. And Jesus said, "Nicodemus, if I talk to you about things on earth and you don't believe me, how are you going to believe me when I talk about spiritual things. No one has seen God unless he came down from heaven. The Son of Man's home is in heaven. At this point Nicodemus doesn't understand that Jesus is talking about himself.

Jesus then tells Nicodemus that the Son of Man must be lifted up just as Moses lifted the serpent up in the wilderness.

Jesus knew that Nicodemus knew the biblical scripture about Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness. Moses had led the Israelites out of Egypt and the harsh treatment they had been subjected to. The journey had difficulties and the people were discontented. They argued with Moses that they at least had plenty of food to eat and water to drink. They argued and fussed with Moses so much that God got tired of hearing their complaints. He had let Moses strike the mountain and let water come gushing out. They had just been victorious over a group that wanted to destroy them. Seeing God's display of mercy in their lives, they not only fussed and argued with Moses, they began to speak against God. So, God punished them by letting poisonous snakes bite and kill many of them.

The people finally came to Moses and said they had sinned against God and asked that he take the serpents away from them.

God relented, he told Moses to make an image of a poisonous snake and put it on a pole. Moses made a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. The scripture tells us that when someone was bitten, they looked at that serpent and lived.

Why do you think this was so? Was the chaos of people being bitten and dying so horrible that just looking at the bronze snake reminded people of a time they never wanted to relive. They really believed that by looking at the bronze image they would be saved from death.

You think it elicited a prayer of thanks to God that it was over? Perhaps it did.

Jesus knew Nicodemus understood that the bronze snake had been venerated by the people. And he was telling Nicodemus that the Son of Man had to be lifted up, venerated and believed in just as strongly as the people had believed in that bronze snake. And if they did that, they would have eternal life or the presence of God in their lives forever.

Jesus told Nicodemus that God loved the world and that he didn't want to condemn it. Instead, he gave his only Son and if anyone believed in him, they would have this eternal life.

And so it is Jesus, the light, came into the world to rescue people from or to call them out of darkness, doing things that are evil or disobedient to God. I think it fair to say that many people walk in the light of Jesus, doing good and wishing good for others. And when we do something wrong, we are quick to ask Jesus for forgiveness.

Unlike Nicodemus we don't have to come secretly at night to be in the presence of Jesus. We learn of him from the scripture of the Bible and his writings in the Gospels. We may have encountered him in unique experiences in our own lives.

We have certainly lifted him up by being baptized. Amen.

Rev. Lionel Starks