

March 14, 2021

**The Rev. Barry P. Kubler
St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Plant City, Fl.**

**Fourth Sunday in Lent
John 3: 14-21**

'For God So Loved the World'

In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Toward the end of my senior year at Virginia Seminary I found myself heading home to participate in a long week-end of required meetings prior to my ordination to the priesthood. One of those meetings would be with the Diocesan Commission on Ministry. In a letter sent to me by the Chairman of the Commission on Ministry I had been provided with a few samples of the questions I would be asked by the members of the commission during our time together. One of those questions had to do with how I understood the importance of the Bible as a component of my faith.

This morning's gospel story of Jesus' late night meeting with Nicodemus affords me with an opportunity to revisit with you my answer to that question. It is a question that I believe all thoughtful and committed Christians should be prepared to answer whenever the occasion might arise.

My brothers and sisters I believe the Bible is a story - or, more specifically, a collection of stories. Further, I believe the Bible's stories are about our God, about God's people, about Jesus, about you, and about me. In fact, more broadly, I believe the stories of the Bible are not just about humanity, but encompass the totality of God's creation. They are stories that span the ages, from the earliest moments and memories of cosmic and human existence, to the most recent events in our corporate and individual lives.

When he was asked a similar question about the importance of the Bible in his life, Abraham Lincoln, our 16th President, said it was "... *the best gift God has given to man.*" He believed the Bible to contain some of the most important promises and covenants for the living of our lives. I agree with Lincoln.

Some of those covenants and promises were made between God and the whole of the human race. Others were made during particular moments, with specific members of

the human race. In one way, or another, all covenants speak to, and define for us, the nature of our relationship with God, our Creator. I also believe that those stories of covenant and relationship provide us with the foundational principles of our faith - ultimately leading us to Jesus Christ and the gospel message we heard this morning.

The setting, or, as you've heard me say before, the 'context' for our gospel reading today, begins with Jesus' reference to a story in one of the earliest books in the Hebrew Scriptures - the book of Numbers. Under the leadership of Moses, God's chosen people have been on a long journey in the wilderness, precipitated by their escape from Egypt. And while the Promised Land objective has been identified - God's chosen people have grown impatient and recalcitrant. To the point that they are now almost in open rebellion - complaining to Moses about what they perceive to be God's lack of concern and love for them. Their complaints range from the harshness of their conditions, to the scarcity and quality of their food, and the arduous nature of such a long and seemingly never-ending journey. To make matters worse, in the face of their lack of faithfulness, scripture tells us that God has challenged them with an ongoing confrontation with poisonous serpents. The consequence of which finds many of the Israelites being bitten and dying every day.

After a time, the people appear to come to their senses - expressing an awareness of how they might have contributed to the dilemma they find themselves in. They go to Moses and confess their unfaithfulness to God. They then plead with Moses to intervene with God on their behalf. Moses does so, and God, hearing the people's cries of anguish and repentance, instructs Moses to fashion a serpent of bronze, place it on a pole, and, as the people continue their journey, when someone is bitten by a serpent, that person need only look at the serpent of bronze to save themselves from dying.

And, it is here, my friends, that we enter our story in John's gospel. Jesus recalls that story as he speaks to Nicodemus and others gathered around him on that night. Jesus says, "*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life,*" reminding his audience, and those of us here this morning, of an age old promise made by God. "*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.*" It is a promise made by God that many refer to as the Christian Gospel in miniature. A promise so well known, to Christians and non-Christians alike, that all we need to say is John 3:16 and people know exactly what we mean.

The focus for this gospel message becomes even clearer if we go back a few verses, to the beginning of the story in chapter 3. You remember who Nicodemus is? Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a respected and important leader of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, the governing religious council. While it may be a bit too early to call Nicodemus a 'follower'

of Jesus, he has clearly been intrigued by Jesus' message and the effects of his ministry. Nicodemus is presented to us as a man of some open-mindedness. He's curious. He does not appear to suffer fools easily. He has questions - lots of questions. And, probably being mindful of his place in society, and the authority he wields, he seeks Jesus out, quietly, and at night. The conversation between the two, along with other observers, begins. What follows we might loosely refer to as an early form of 'Pub Theology,' - though there is no indication in Scripture that any alcoholic libations were consumed. Anyway, Nicodemus opens the conversation by saying to Jesus - *"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."*

Jesus responds to Nicodemus, which leads to more questions, and no small amount of consternation on Nicodemus' part. Remember Jesus telling him that he must be born of 'water and the spirit?' Nicodemus rightfully appears baffled, trying to figure out how it would be possible for him to again enter his mother's womb and be born again.

As the night wears on, Jesus provides Nicodemus much to ponder and pray about. It's a lot to absorb. And not just for Nicodemus. It's a lot for us to absorb as well. It's a lot to believe. So many questions. Not enough answers. Clarity is elusive. And Jesus knows Nicodemus is struggling with all he has heard. He's still thinking about that bronze serpent on a pole in the wilderness and how Jesus must be lifted up in a similar manner.

My brothers and sisters, the Gospel, the story of the Bible, is the story of God's acceptance, God's grace, and God's promise of eternal life through the gift of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Yet, as I hope we all know, God's free grace is not cheap grace. John 3:16 makes that very clear. God's love and forgiveness come at the price of Jesus' death - God's Son. This morning Jesus reminds us of that truth, and that there is nothing we can do to merit that gift. Not even for those we believe to be the best among us. We can never earn it. God's unmerited love comes with no strings attached. What is eternally important however; is for us to receive God's free gift.

Our Gospel for today is both good news - news that tells us of God's grace to us in Christ, but also some very hard news. News that has, at times, troubled me, and I'm sure you, as well. Scripture tells us that some of us will turn away from God's gift - literally, some will turn away from the love of God. Some will refuse to accept God's gift of forgiveness and eternal life. John puts it this way. *'There are some people who love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil - those people condemn themselves because they refuse to believe in the light. There are many who see Jesus and come to faith; others will scoff and deride. They love darkness and reject the light.'*

My friends, embedded in the promise Jesus shares with us today is the understanding that with our God, there is always hope. In the face of Nicodemus' questions, the impatience and complaints of our wandering ancestors, and yes, even in the face of our own recalcitrance, God continues to offer us grace.

In this story from the Bible Jesus does what Jesus does so well - he extends to Nicodemus the promise of God's love. Don't worry about unanswered questions, says Jesus. God did not send me into the world to condemn the world. He sent me to save the world. Believe in me. Believe in God. I offer you the light of life. Those who follow me, who believe in me, will be drawn to that light.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

My brothers and sisters, that is what I believe about the Bible. It is the same answer I shared with the Commission on Ministry many years ago. It's my answer today, and will be tomorrow.

God's unconditional love is the story of the Bible. It is God's story. It is Jesus' story. It is my story. It is your story. It's a story about love. A love that gives, and gives, and will always give. A story that constantly encourages us all - to follow the cross, to follow the light, to follow the love.

So, I leave you with this question. What do you believe about the Bible? What is your story? Amen.