

Meeting by Night

Lenten Journey: Part 2 “Meeting by Night”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael –March 5, 2023

2nd Sunday in Lent

Readings: John 3:1-17

Reflection: Psalm 121

Greeting: Come, let us go to the house of our God. So that he may teach us his ways. And may we walk in God’s paths. Come, let us walk by the light of the Lord! (*Isaiah 2:3-5*)

Prayer: Lord, we ask for your guidance in these forty days. May you help us to prepare our hearts and lives to be transformed by your steadfast love. Be gracious to all who have strayed from your ways like lost sheep, and return us to the fold of your mercy. Help us as we journey with our Savior to know your truth and grace. May we be moved by your Spirit that we may join together to humbly worship you. We pray that you will strengthen us by faith that we may walk in your light and may share your good news with joyful and glad hearts as we celebrate our deliverance from slavery to sin and death through the sacrifice of your Son our Savior. And it is in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore. (Psalm 121 NRSV)*

We read the words of Psalm 121 and we hear of seeking God for help. That the Lord watches over his people. The Lord will keep us and protect us. That God cannot be moved and will not stop his constant vigil. How do you reach out to God for assistance? What are the words that you use when you are needing help? Do you place your complete trust in Christ’s redeeming grace? Do you share that grace and extend that invitation to others? How has your heart and life been changed because of Christ? How can you share Christ with others in this season of preparation?

Prayer: O God, help us to remember your great compassion for your people as shown to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. May you help us to prepare to have our hearts and lives be changed through your mercy and grace. May your steadfast love inspire and strengthen us in these forty days. It is with penitent and grateful hearts that we come before to share our joys

and our concerns on this day. We ask that you lift us up in both our laughter and our tears so that we may know your compassion. May you bless us in both our celebrations and our sorrows so that we may know that you are always with us, and may we always be thankful for your faithfulness as shown through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture reading for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our reading for today comes from John chapter 3 verse 1 through verse 17.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He 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 unless God is with that person." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus 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?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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. "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. "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. (John 3:1-17 NRSV)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

We continue our Lenten journey, this time meeting by night. Who is Jesus meeting under the cover of darkness? A Pharisee named Nicodemus. He comes to Jesus at night and says to him that he knows he is a teacher from God. Now, one of the first questions to come up is why are they meeting by night? But I think we have a reason for that. I think it's the fact that Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He's trying to understand Jesus and what he teaches. If there's one thing that's a constant throughout John, it is a clash between Jesus and the religious experts. All of those traditional religious authorities take issue with what Jesus has to say often because it's not terribly kind for those in power. Nicodemus may have been worried that he might have a falling out with the other Pharisees. So, he comes to get answers by night. He and Jesus have a discussion. Jesus starts with something that causes some confusion. That "no one can

see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” This seems to be a stumbling block for Nicodemus. Because Nicodemus can’t get past the literal physical meaning those words have. He doesn’t know how someone can go through the birthing process a second time. His problem with what Jesus has said gets at a big issue. That at first glance, Nicodemus seems kind of foolish because it seems like a ridiculous objection. Our gut reaction might be to laugh at his inability to understand. Except I see the same thing happen all the time.

Because the problem is that Nicodemus is taking everything literally. Jesus is speaking figuratively. He is speaking of a truth beyond simple physical understanding. But this is a rather common thing for people to do. We can just as easily read something in the Bible and think it must simply be physical reality and we too strip away symbolic and metaphorical meaning. And while trying to justify how something can be physically true, we may even end up like Nicodemus, except that we argue against observation and experience in trying to justify how we understand the Scripture. How does Jesus respond to Nicodemus? That one must be born of both water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh what is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Now, Jesus is making a bit of a distinction here. He's talking about another kind of birth, not the physical one but a gift of the Spirit. Now, these are things that we often associate with baptism, which itself is a symbolic act. We saw Jesus baptized last week in a symbolic act. John was not out there washing the dirt off people so they could repent but was helping people symbolically cleanse themselves so they could change their hearts and lives. We take on new life when we are born into the Spirit. We invite the Holy Spirit to be a part of our lives, we dedicate ourselves to following God and are born again by the Spirit.

At this point, it seems like Nicodemus still isn't quite understanding what Christ is saying. It might be because the symbolism he's using flies over Nicodemus' head. He might be so wrapped up in the physical acts that he can't absorb the spiritual. It might be because Nicodemus is used to ritual cleanliness and purity codes, but not about a personal relationship with the Spirit. And Nicodemus is struggling, partly because it still sounds like he's having trouble getting past his own preconceived notions. What Nicodemus is hearing doesn't match what he was expecting, and now he's struggling to understand what Jesus is actually saying. Jesus isn't talking about a second physical birth. Jesus is talking about living a life in God through the Spirit. They seem to be stuck. Jesus is telling him that if he can't understand these things, how is he going to understand the deeper teachings that he has for him?

It is here that we get to what many would consider the most important part of today's reading. John 3:16 is the most well-known verse in the Bible. I could probably ask any of you and you would be able to tell me at least one version of it from at least one translation. And most of them have been written to keep this format. “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.” There may be extra words, or it may be slightly changed, but it's the same meaning. However, just as we talked about pulling a verse out of context last week, verse 16 here is understood best when we know what surrounds it. We start with the prologue because Jesus likes reaching

back and citing the scriptures. This time he quotes from Numbers chapter 21, recounting Moses in the wilderness. Jesus recounts the story of Moses praying and asking for deliverance for the Israelites that have rebelled. They have not been behaving themselves. So Moses puts a serpent of bronze on a staff and he lifts up that serpent in the wilderness that whoever sees it will be saved. "And 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." This is the lead up to John 3:16. It is talking about saving people from sin, delivering the people who had gone astray. So, when we reached that next line, we have a framework in place. God loved the world to reach out to who? To those who have gone astray. Why? So that they can live. That those who believe in the Son of Man may find eternal life. How are we to fully understand John 3:16? We understand it by verse 17. Why has Jesus been sent? Not to condemn the world. Not to sentence the world for failing. Not to turn his back on world. "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." Christ's message is not one of despair but of hope. Christ's message is not about who is to be condemned but who can be saved. Christ's message is not about casting others down, but about God lifting up. This is the context for God's love. This is the theology of John. Who are we? We are people. We are flesh. We are born of the flesh but called to be born of the Spirit. Why? Because we are called live in Christ. Why? Because he came to save the world. Did he come to condemn it? No. Out of love he came to save it and in love redeems us. And that's the message. That is what comes from this meeting by night.

Something must have resonated with Nicodemus. At some point, he must have been convinced of Christ's message. Because in John's Gospel, he makes another important appearance. Nicodemus is there to help Joseph of Arimathea place Christ in the tomb, bringing myrrh and aloes for the burial. Nicodemus may have taken some time to fully understand, and that's OK. Sometimes faith takes time. Not everyone has a singular moment when everything changes, but sometimes it is a gradual shift. But we can take away a few things from this interaction. This exchange helps us to fully understand God's love for us. It helps us to understand how easily we can confuse ourselves by ignoring the mystery of faith. Faith isn't built on physical evidence and scientific methods. And not everything in the Bible is meant to be taken as a physical reality. We can be like Nicodemus and get so hung up on literalness that we fail to understand the symbolism. We can get so focused on everything being literal that we literally miss the point the Jesus is making! It is easier for us to understand God's love when we can embrace the mystery of faith. Because even if it is a mystery for us as to why God would love us, we can rest assured that he does. We can find hope in the truth of Christ's message of salvation. It is that message of hope and love that helps me to prepare my heart, mind, body, and soul.

So, I continue last week's challenge of engaging with Scripture during this season of Lent. I pray that as we engage with Scripture that we allow ourselves to understand the message that we may find. That we may grow in our understanding as we process the

allusions, the allegory, the parable and the proverb, the poetry and proclamations, all there so that we can more deeply understand the character of God. So as we more deeply engage with Scripture in this season of preparation, let us understand the deeper meanings and let us not get hung up on physicality and historicity, but let us embrace what it tells us about our God's love. And may we do so that we may grow that much more in our love and understand, so that we may once more discover how deep and wonderful God's love is, and may we once again discover the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Lenten Journey

Our current series is a journey through Lent. Each week we have a story of Jesus that helps us as we prepare ourselves during Lent. As we travel through these forty days with Christ, we learn important lessons along the way.

February 26th – *To the Wilderness* – Matthew 3:13-4:17

March 5th – *Meeting by Night* – John 3:1-17

March 12th – *Going to the Well* – John 4:5-42

March 19th – *Seeing the Path* – John 9:1-41

March 26th – *Visiting Friends* – John 11:1-45

Prayer List

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup Ambulance Crew		Our Healthcare Workers	Eric Veach
Ed & Verna Titus	Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney
Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart
Phyllis Gabel	Tom Finley	Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor
Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert	Jackie Potter	Phil Hawickhorst
Ray Carr	Jane Williams	Alice Sherwood	Richard Durham
Kathy Hanks	Steve Carlen	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Alberta Darling
Stanley Kiser	Corrine Howard	Stacy Janes	Don Gilmore
Shirley Jester	Connie Brown	Jim Irwin	Gary & Mary Winterrowd
Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser	Larry Thompson	Evelyn Sue Icenogle
Greg Williams	Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter	Paul Schulte
Lavon Figgins	Janet Freeman		

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