



Liturgical Day: The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Date: March 22, 2009

Sermon Title: Believe In (not about) God

God so loved the world
Good news for Nicodemus.

Good news for us too

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

John 3:16 is one of the most well-known passages in the entire Bible. How many of you, like me, committed it to memory very early in life? Luther called it "The Gospel in Miniature" and he was right: it expresses the very heart of what we profess as Christians. For those of us who believe in Jesus Christ, and in what he promises to us, there is no need to fear death. God has given us the gift of life – a gift that begins in this life, and continues beyond it. It is a simple promise, and it seems like a relatively simple and straightforward Bible passage. But a closer look reveals a bit more.

Many know this verse, but many fewer know that it is actually part of a challenge that Jesus offers to Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a leader of the Jewish people, who sneaks out one night (under cover of darkness) to meet with Jesus. He is interested in Jesus. He wants to learn more about him, but he doesn't dare let other people see him. The other Jerusalem leaders already have their suspicions about Jesus (the stunt in the temple, last week's Gospel lesson, didn't help matters any), so rather than approach him during the day, Nicodemus creeps to where he is, when he is pretty sure nobody will see him doing so.

Nicodemus begins with a compliment to Jesus: he describes him as "a teacher who has come from God." But Jesus knows Nicodemus better than Nicodemus knows himself. Jesus knows that what Nicodemus needs is not to believe certain things about Jesus. What he needs is to believe in Jesus. To trust in Jesus. To be more interested in his relationship with Jesus than anything else – even his reputation or his physical safety. So Jesus challenges him. When Nicodemus describes Jesus as a teacher from God, Jesus tells him that he will have to be born from above before he'll ever see the kingdom of God. Nothing less than a complete new beginning will give Nicodemus what he needs. Nothing less than giving up on his position in Jerusalem, his stature in that Holy City, his reputation among Jewish leaders. These things are meaningless, Jesus says. What is important is that God's spirit takes hold of your heart, and causes your faith to be the central reality in your life.

Well, that is quite a challenge for Nicodemus. He sneaks out to see Jesus one dark night. But Jesus tells him that unless he is willing to live in the light – to live publicly as a follower of his – then he is never going to experience what it means to be right with God. He doesn't say that everyone who believes the right things about God's only son will know life. He says that those who believe in him will not perish, but will have eternal life. And Nicodemus will eventually learn what it means to believe in Jesus. St. John tells us that after Jesus dies, Nicodemus goes in broad daylight with Philip of Arimathea to request Jesus' body, so they can give it a proper burial. Somewhere along the way, Nicodemus stops believing in his own ability, his own reputation, his own power, and his own achievements. He

dies to those forms of idolatry, and is willing to risk it all to believe in Jesus. We don't know what happened to him after that. But we know what Jesus

FIRST LESSON

NUMBERS 21:4-9

PSALM

PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22

SECOND LESSON

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. JOHN 3:14-21

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**HOLY GOD, RICH IN
MERCY, BY THE
HUMILIATION OF YOUR
SON YOU LIFTED UP THIS
FALLEN WORLD AND
RESCUED US FROM THE
HOPELESSNESS OF
DEATH. LEAD US INTO
YOUR LIGHT, THAT ALL
OUR DEEDS MAY REFLECT
YOUR LOVE, THROUGH
JESUS CHRIST, OUR
SAVIOR AND LORD, WHO
LIVES AND REIGNS WITH
YOU AND THE HOLY
SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW
AND FOREVER. AMEN.**

9300 E. BELLEVIEW AVE.
GREENWOOD VILLAGE,
COLORADO 80111

VOICE

(303) 770-9300

FAX

(303) 770-9301

WEB

WWW.STPLC.ORG



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

promises him. Nicodemus learns to believe in Jesus, and undoubtedly begins to experience the life Jesus wants him to know.

The lesson that Nicodemus learns from Jesus is not unlike the lesson that Ancient Israel learns in the wilderness. We catch a glimpse of this in today's first lesson. It is a strange story. Israel is once again complaining about their lot, and God gets sick of it. God sends poisonous snakes to bite them, and many who are bitten, die. The people realize what they have done, they confess their faithlessness, and God saves them. Not by eliminating the snakes (which is Israel's request), but by giving them something else. God has Moses create a bronze snake, and lift it up on a pole in the midst of the people. From then on, whenever a snake bites them they can look up to this sign of God's promise to save, and not die. They had come to believe some things about God, during their years of wandering in the desert. But in this story, they began to learn how to believe in God. To believe in God's love. To believe in God's grace. To believe in God's desire to save them. To believe in the sign God has given them: that snake, that image of death, hoisted up on a pole in the midst of them.

It is the way God works with Ancient Israel, it is the way Jesus graces those who met him, and it is the way we know God as active and involved in our lives today. We Lutherans are a cerebral bunch. We have a long, proud theological tradition. It is one of our great strengths as a community of faith. At the same time, it is one of our most threatening weaknesses. Because it is easy to imagine that faithfulness has to do with believing the right teachings about God; about Jesus. It is easy to imagine that getting it all right is what the Bible, and our faith, is all about.

In reality, having it all right is not what it is all about. If believing the truth about God is at the heart of our faith, then the one in the Bible who comes closest to getting it right is Satan. Satan knows what God is capable of. Satan remembers what God has accomplished. Satan works twice as hard to oppose God, because of what Satan has come to believe about God.

No – the Christian faith is not centered on believing truths about God. It is centered on learning to trust in God. Learning to trust in God for the forgiveness that we need. Learning to trust in God for the strength that faithfulness requires. Learning to trust in God for the ability to get through whatever this world tries to throw at us. In these experiences, it is not what we have come to know about God that counts. It is our capacity to trust in God that makes all the difference.

This is not an easy thing to do. We live in a self-reliant society. We are taught that hard work and perseverance are what set us up for the most promising future. We learn to rely on ourselves, and nobody else. In this context, it is sometimes hard to entrust our future to someone else – even to God! Yet, as Jesus teaches, that is what leads to life. Believing in him. Entrusting our lives to him. Relying on him, and on his presence in our lives, for the wisdom and the strength and the courage we need to live as God's faithful people.

Israel wouldn't inherit the promised land, as long as they relied on their own land or power or money or fame. It was only as they learned to trust in God that they became ready to receive such a gift. Nicodemus wouldn't inherit the gift of eternity as long as he trusted in his religious accomplishments or his reputation in Jerusalem, or his personal ability. It was only as he learned to trust in God that he began to experience the eternal life that Jesus described. And no matter what threatens our lives, if we decide to trust in our own wisdom or strength or finances or reputation, our future will always be in doubt. It is only as we learn to entrust our future to the God who loves us so, who has defeated the powers of death, and who promises us life eternal – as we begin to trust this God, we can learn to live without fear, and take delight in the gifts that Christ has given us.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (March 21, 2009)

Gospel Lesson; English Text:

^{3:14} [Jesus said,] “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”ⁱ

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{3:14} Καὶ καθὼς Μωϋσῆς ὑψωσεν τὸν ὄφιν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, οὕτως ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ¹⁵ ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον. ¹⁶ οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ’ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον. ¹⁷ οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα κρίνη τὸν κόσμον, ἀλλ’ ἵνα σωθῆ ὁ κόσμος δι’ αὐτοῦ. ¹⁸ ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν οὐ κρίνεται ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων ἤδη κέκριται, ὅτι μὴ πεπίστευκεν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ μονογενοῦς υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ. ¹⁹ αὕτη δέ ἐστιν ἡ κρίσις ὅτι τὸ φῶς ἐλήλυθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον καὶ ἠγάπησαν οἱ ἄνθρωποι μᾶλλον τὸ σκότος ἢ τὸ φῶς ἦν γὰρ αὐτῶν πονηρὰ τὰ ἔργα. ²⁰ πᾶς γὰρ ὁ φαῦλα πράσσει μισεῖ τὸ φῶς καὶ οὐκ ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα μὴ ἐλεγχθῆ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ ²¹ ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα φανερωθῆ αὐτοῦ τὰ ἔργα ὅτι ἐν θεῷ ἐστιν εἰργασμένα. ⁱⁱ

ⁱ St. John 3:14-21, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱ St. John 3:14-21, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).