

March 11, 2018
4th Sunday of Lent
John 3:14-21

[Jesus said to Nicodemus:] 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who 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 might not perish but might have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. 21 But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

Background

The gospel for this Sunday is part of a dialogue that Jesus had with Nicodemus. That dialogue began when "a certain Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, came to him at night. 'Rabbi,' he said, 'we know you are a teacher come from God, for no man can perform signs and wonders such as you perform unless God is with him.'" (John 3:1-2) Nicodemus asks three questions of Jesus, and Jesus' responses form a dialogue that concludes in verse 21. In the first of the narratives, Jesus reassures Nicodemus that no one can be part of the reign of God unless they are begotten from above. While the question is not directly stated in the text, it seems that Nicodemus' confusion has been caused by a word that can either mean "again" or "from above." In the second, Jesus tells him that one must be begotten of water and the Holy Spirit to enter the Kingdom of God. The third response is the text for this Sunday, which deals with why the Son of Man had to be "lifted up."

In order to protect his reputation as a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus had come to Jesus at night. Later in John's gospel, the reactions to Jesus' teaching in the temple produced a divided response, with some believing him and others wanting him arrested. The chief priests and the Pharisees insulted the Temple police for not arresting Jesus on the spot. (John 7: 45-49) But Nicodemus questioned their thinking. "Since when does our law condemn any man without first hearing him and knowing the facts?" (John 7:51) At that point they turn their taunts on Nicodemus. "You are not from Galilee also, are you? Look and see that no prophet arises from Galilee." (John 7:52B) Finally, at the end of John's gospel, it was Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, who made sure that Jesus' body was buried. (John 19:38-42)



In Jesus' response to Nicodemus that is recorded in the gospel text for today, Jesus draws on the familiar story of Moses in the desert to explain how one can be begotten of the Spirit. Jesus makes a bridge between himself, who will be lifted up on the cross, and the bronze serpent Moses used in the desert. The Lord told Moses to mount a bronze serpent on a pole and lift it up in the air. Anyone who had been bitten by a snake and then looked upon the serpent would be cured. (Numbers 21:8-9) Jesus is saying that, in a like manner, he will be lifted up on a cross, and anyone who looks on him with faith will be saved from death and will have eternal life.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you know people who seem to need time to wrestle with questions of life, meaning, and their belief in God?
2. Have you ever had questions about your faith or about your relationship with God?
3. Have you ever thought God was deliberately remaining mysterious, hidden, or difficult to understand?
4. Have you ever asked yourself what kind of God would God be if God were easy to understand, and easy to perceive?
5. Why do you think many monastic communities gather to pray in the night and at an hour before dawn? Do you think the darkness and the night have an impact on the quality of their prayer?
6. Do you ever pray to God in the quiet of the night?
7. How do you see Jesus responding to Nicodemus in this text?
8. How do you reconcile what Jesus is saying in this text, about those who are already condemned for their lack of faith, and how he is responding to Nicodemus?
9. Jesus draws on the image of the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up for people to look at and be healed. Jesus then says: "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Have you ever prayed by just looking at the image of Jesus on the cross? What does this text say to you about that kind of prayer?
10. Why would it have been important for John's community to remember and record Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus?
11. Can you take some time to talk with God about your questions, about how Jesus seems to be responding to Nicodemus, or about your own desire to be in right relationship with God?

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