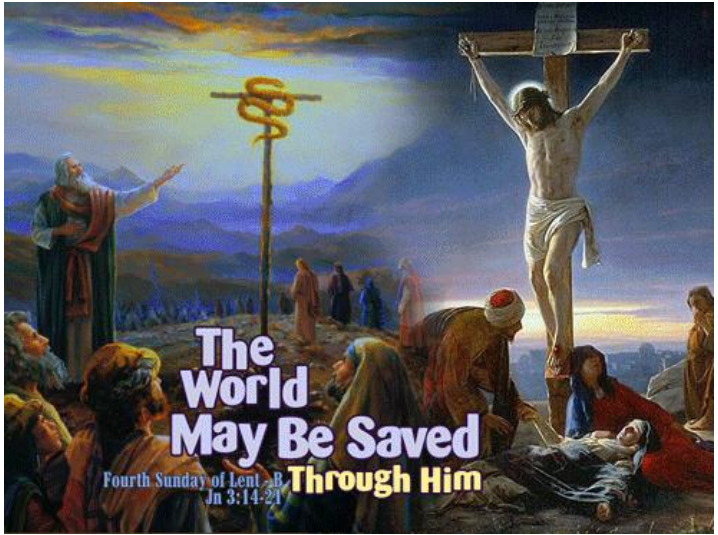


March 14, 2021
4th Sunday of Lent
John 3:14-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus: Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, 15 so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 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) Jesus states that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." (John 3:3) Nicodemus responds by asking Jesus three questions concerning what Jesus means by his statement. Jesus' responses form a dialogue that concludes in verse 21. The first statement reassures Nicodemus that no one can be part of the reign of God unless they are begotten from above. It is possible 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 statement is the text for this Sunday, which deals with why the Son of Man had to be "lifted up."

In Jesus' response to Nicodemus in this gospel text, 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. Have you had conversations you remember that went into the night?
2. Are there qualities about the night that lend themselves to those kinds of conversations?
3. Do you know people who seem more prone than others to wrestle with questions of life and faith in God?
4. Are you one of those people? Were you more so like that earlier in life or more so now?

5. Have you ever thought God was deliberately remaining mysterious, hidden, or difficult to understand?
6. Have you ever asked yourself what kind of God would God be, if God were easy to understand?
7. 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?
8. Do you ever pray to God in the quiet of the night?
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. 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?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM.

They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel.

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