

March 14, 2021 ~ 4th Sunday in Lent ~ In darkness you come

In silence we wait; in darkness you come to us, bring us your light! Amen.

This prayer was part of the rite marking the first-year anniversary of the World Health Organization's Declaration of the Global Coronavirus Pandemic on March 11, 2020. The prayer introduced 3 minutes of silence.

I find this to be a beautiful prayer for Lent.

In silence we wait; in darkness you come to us, bring us your light!

Light and darkness are prominent themes in the Bible. It begins right with the story of creation in the first chapter of Genesis and carries into the gospels and then into Paul's themes.

And God saw that the light was good and God separated the light from the darkness. Genesis 1:4

The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. Matthew 3:16
This is a direct quote from the prophet Isaiah.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John 8:12

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light. Ephesians 5:8

It is significant that a man named Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. We are not told why he came at night. Perhaps he wanted some peace and quiet, some alone time, with Jesus. Maybe he didn't wish to be seen by other Pharisees, other Jewish religious leaders. We just don't know as the gospel doesn't give us any clues. The dark isn't normally a place that we associate with learning and safety and the presence of God. Many young children like night lights in their room so that the room isn't completely dark when they go to sleep.

Here's what we do know from the gospel narrative. We do know that Nicodemus is profoundly interested in Jesus' message. He has respect for Jesus and calls him Rabbi and Teacher. We also know that he believes that Jesus comes from God ("no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." John 3:2). Nicodemus thinks in a rational and literal way and does not understand the nuances when Jesus tells him that he must "be born from above." Jesus' teachings about the Holy Spirit are an eye-opener for Nicodemus.

Our gospel passage for this morning from John 3:14-21 is part of that late-night conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus compares the healing power of the bronze snake on a pole which healed the Hebrews from poisonous snake bites when they were wandering in the wilderness with Moses to what will happen to Jesus, that he will be lifted up. We know that this will happen on the cross.

Then Jesus says the verse that was the first verse that I memorized, as a child, from the Bible. "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." John 3:16

Jesus invites Nicodemus to believe that he can save the world. And then Jesus draws out the themes of light and darkness.

The light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. John 3:20

Jesus goes on to explain that evil people hate the light (yes, Jesus uses the word hate) and do not wish to come into the light as the light exposes their evil deeds. When we willingly come into the light, out of faith, it "may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." John 3:21

Isn't that true? I like to vacuum when the sun is shining directly on my hardwood floors. Then I can see all the dust. I was shocked the other day when the sun shone directly on my bathroom mirror to see all the streaks from my window cleaner. The light points out what we cannot see in the dark. When we become children of light, our awareness of our shortcomings increases and we are blessed with a desire to do good deeds in the name of God.

However, let us not discount the teaching power of the dark. Just like Nicodemus, we often learn in the dark and the dark has much to teach us. One of the great Christian mystics of the 1500's, John of the Cross, wrote about the dark night of the soul. It is a time when we feel lost and alone and dealing with the many challenges of life. It is a spiritual crisis as we journey towards the light of God. We don't appreciate the light until we have been willing to sit and listen and learn in the dark.

The night time dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus ends abruptly at this point. No small talk. No follow-up comments about the next time. Nicodemus is left with the images of light and darkness in his heart and in his mind.

What happens to Nicodemus? Does he turn to the light? Here is what we know from the Bible.

Nicodemus becomes a believer. The Bible calls him "one of them" (John 7:50). He defends Jesus from arrest by the temple priest. Nicodemus uses the law and precedent to make his point, "our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" (John 7:51). The religious leaders respond by scoffing at him. This must have been hurtful to Nicodemus, to have his peers make fun of him. They get snippy and reply to him that he must be from Galilee, where Jesus is from. The ultimate put-down.

Does this ostracization silence Nicodemus? Absolutely not. He learned in the dark. He has come into the light and stays there. We learn one final fact about this man. He was there when Jesus was taken down from the cross. He brought with him 100 lbs of spices, myrrh and aloes, with which to anoint the body. His companion was Joseph of Arimathea who was a secret Christian. This contrast with Nicodemus implies that Nicodemus was public in his beliefs. That would have taken tremendous courage. Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea put the wrapped body of Jesus into Joseph's new tomb in the garden.

Do we know anything else about this man who had turned to the light? Not really. Some ancient sources say that he was banished from Jerusalem and died in poverty.

We are over half-way through Lent. Use the remainder of this time to wait in the dark and move into the light. The dark can be our teacher. What have you learned during this past year of the pandemic? Examine your thoughts and actions. What deeds have you done to the glory of God?

In silence we wait; in darkness you come to us, bring us your light!

Amen.