

March 11,2018
Fourth Sunday in Lent
John 3:13-21

CHOOSE LIGHT

This is the 4th Sunday in Lent. You know what that means. Palm Sunday is two weeks away, followed by Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Someone told me years ago that they loved the Maundy Thursday service at Fellowship but Good Friday is just too sad, depressing really. Most of you know Maundy Thursday/Good Friday tradition. On Thursday, we celebrate the Lord's Supper followed by a candlelight Tennebrae service where we read the story of Jesus' arrest and trial up to the point of the crucifixion. As each section of the story is read, one candle is extinguished so that by the end, the sanctuary is dark and we all leave in silence. It is a very moving, spirit-filled service. If you haven't attended before I highly recommend you do so for your own spiritual well being.

We continue the service on Friday, returning in silence. The sanctuary lights are dimmed, there are no decorative items in the church, and we read the terrible details of the crucifixion. Yes it is terrible to be reminded of the suffering and the agonizing death. But let me tell you it is something we all desperately need. If we don't face the reality of what happened, our faith is hollow, even meaningless. And, I will tell you something else, when you do face it on Good Friday, you might feel a deep sorrow, but it is a powerful Spirit-filled sorrow and you will be blessed by it. Because, we do know the end of the story. We know that in 3 days Jesus will rise from that terrible grave. He will be wholly restored and we will celebrate the reality that God did this amazing work through the suffering and death of Christ because God so loved the world, he gave his only Son.

Jesus explains this early in John's Gospel, in a conversation he had with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a seeker. Something going on that was pulling Nicodemus toward Jesus. He wanted to ask some hard questions, but he wasn't ready to go public with his thoughts yet. He came in the dark of night and said: **Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."** John 3:2 That is when Jesus told Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again from the Spirit. And that was when Nicodemus got confused, naturally, so Jesus kept teaching. Our Gospel lesson today is in the middle of what scholars call the Nicodemus Discourse. Listen to the words of Jesus:

I know a lot of people are terrified of snakes. The last time I mentioned snakes in a sermon, someone told me later he almost had to get up and leave, because just thinking about them makes his hands break out in a cold sweat. Of course not all snakes are venomous. There really are good snakes and bad snakes. A big grey snake with no rattles on its tail is a good snake. A big grey snake that rattles is bad. But few people are inclined to take the time to investigate when they come across a snake on the path. To a lot of people the only good snake is a dead snake. There is just something about serpents that probably goes back to the day Adam and Eve were ejected from the garden.

So, it is odd that Jesus would bring up snakes in the course of teaching Nicodemus about the promise of eternal life and God's everlasting love. The oddity is not lessened by the fact that Jesus is referring to the equally odd passage from the Old Testament about snakes, the passage we just heard Doc read.

The Israelites had been out in the wilderness with Moses for quite some time. You will recall that early on in that journey out from the land of Egypt, they had complained about not having enough food, so God sent the manna from heaven. They had complained about lack of water, so God made water flow from rocks. Well, that was a long time ago. Now they are tired, wandering around lost, eating this manna day after day, and they are beyond whining about it. They've been bad mouthing Moses and they've told God they are just plain sick of it. They'd rather be slaves back in Egypt than put up with this. So, God, who is a little sick himself of hearing the constant complaining from these people, sends poisonous snakes among them and many of them die.

Oh, say the Israelites, we're so sorry, we didn't mean to be such ingrates. Please do something to get rid of these snakes. And God is like really? Now you want me to save you again? But God relents, as God always does. He tells Moses make a bronze image of a fiery serpent, set it up on a really long pole.

The evil snakes might continue to bite, but anyone bitten who looks up at the bronze fiery serpent will not die. When evil overtakes them, they look up at the symbol of evil itself, and they are preserved. By looking up at the terrible, fearsome sight they are saved.

It is an inexplicable and ambiguous story. But it tells us that somehow, in the hands of God, evil and good, fear and hope, death and life are intertwined. And so, Jesus tells us to look at him lifted high up on the cross just as the Israelites looked up at the fiery serpent. Look upon the terrible, fearsome sight and you will be saved. He does not remove all the evil that is in the world. Like the snakes in the desert, evil still exists, but now it cannot overcome you. If you look. But you have to look.

Jesus tells Nicodemus, and us, that he will be hung on a cross and rejected. *this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than.*

The light came into the world and the people loved the darkness. The world rejected Christ. His suffering and death is the direct consequence of that rejection. If we truly want to live in his resurrection light, we must at least face that one truth.

And so we choose. We may choose life in the light or life in the darkness, it is our choice. It's just that obvious and just that simple. And just that hard. The good news is that he gives us everything we need to make the choice and live in the light. Choose light. With his help we can all do it. Amen.