**March 16, 2014 – 2nd Sunday of Lent**

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What in the heck more can I say about this Gospel passage than just to repeat that verse over and over for ten minutes? It pretty much says it all.

But tempting as that might be, focusing on this one verse, even though it’s undoubtedly one of the most famous, most quoted, and most beloved in the entire Bible for us Christians, ignores what the surrounding verses might have to say to us, too.

Nicodemus is one of several characters who only appear in the Gospel of John. He’s identified as a Pharisee, and a member of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin. So it’s clear from that one sentence that he is both a learned and a powerful man. He shows up two other times in John, once at Jesus’ trial, where he stands up for Jesus against the other members of the Sanhedrin, and then finally after the crucifixion where, along with Joseph of Arimathea, he provides the spices to prepare Jesus’ body for burial.

So he’s something of a sympathetic figure, although this first encounter is a little strained. First of all, Nicodemus visits Jesus at night. This is important because John uses the motifs of light and darkness a lot. Remember from the first chapter where it says:

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

So the fact that Nicodemus comes to him under cover of darkness is important. Second, He appears to have some trouble, despite all his learning, in grasping what Jesus is trying to tell him. Nicodemus is in the dark, both figuratively and literally, and Jesus uses that to make his point. John is fond of using a rhetorical device called the deliberate misunderstanding. This is where Jesus says something that can be taken in one of two ways – a spiritual way and an earthly, physical way – and the person he’s speaking to always takes it the earthly, physical way.

In some ways, Nicodemus is more of a convenient illustration rather than a real person because in the middle of their conversation, in verse 11, Jesus, by switching to the second person plural, suddenly starts talking to us rather than exclusively to Nicodemus, and it’s after this that what he really wants us to hear comes out.

Once again, the Scholars™ are all over the map on this subject. John gets so mystical at times, that it’s easy to get lost in the various possibilities and interpretations of this passage. But one idea seems clear, and that is that the way of the Spirit – the way of God – is the way of life, and God’s way can overcome death.

This is illustrated by the reference from Numbers about Moses and the bronze serpent. The story, if you remember, is that the Israelites were complaining about God to Moses and God sends poisonous snakes among them. Then they repent and God instructs Moses to make a brass serpent and mount it on a pole, and everyone who looks at the serpent is cured and lives.

Just like God used the symbol of death – the serpent – in the desert to bring new life to the Israelites, so he will use the death of Jesus, being lifted up just like the serpent was, to bring life to the whole world.

And it’s then that you get the famous verse 3:16 - “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,” which John reiterates by saying, "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."

Our lectionary doesn’t include the next four verses of chapter three, but they go on to make it even clearer:

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. 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. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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.

By choosing the way of God’s spirit, we are choosing life. But it is absolutely our choice to make. And these are choices we make every minute of every day. Do we choose light or do we choose darkness? Can everything we do be exposed to scrutiny? Do we make our choices out in the light, with God in mind, or do we stay in the shadows?

It’s pretty clear to me that many people nowadays have chosen the shadows over the light. From business dealings that take place covertly offshore, to political cover-ups and fraud, to culturally imposed secrecy that protects the perpetrators and harms the victims of things like rape, bullying, and domestic abuse; every day we see examples of the darkness that is the opposite of God’s light.

It’s our job as followers of Jesus to expose the darkness and shine the light of the Spirit on it wherever we find it. This is not an easy task. Society places a lot of pressure on all of us to mind our own business, to not make waves. Sometimes, there is even pressure on us to choose the darkness over the light. It takes courage to stand up to those pressures, and to follow Christ even as he’s being lifted up on the cross, and sometimes our courage fails us. But whenever we feel our courage falter, remember Jesus’ words:

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.

In the face of that basic truth, in the face of a love so great that we can’t begin to understand it, no darkness, no matter how powerful it may seem at the time, can ultimately exist in the world that God has chosen to redeem and save.

Amen.