

**The Fourth in Lent, March 11<sup>th</sup> 2018**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church: Summit, New Jersey**  
**John 3:14-21**

Grace be to you and peace from God our Creator, Redeemer, and Life-giving Spirit. Amen.

I don't know about you and what time you go to bed, but if you're like me, and have some form of cable TV (and I know that some of you don't) then you might very well watch those late night TV shows. When I was a kid, Johnny Carson was the hands-down favorite. These days there are a number of good choices (although we do need a woman in the late-night, prime-time category); so sometimes I find myself switching between Jimmy Kimmel, Jimmy Fallon and Stephen Colbert. Listening to late night conversations and comments on the day's events are often less stressful for me than watching the evening news.

For kids and those of us who are young at heart, there's a whole programming block dedicated to family-friendly TV shows and movies that you can watch in the evening. It's called Nick at Night, and is owned by Nickelodeon. I don't watch Nick at Night, but today we get to overhear a 1<sup>st</sup> century version of it. This one however, is not so much comical as it is confusing. And it's less a story than it is a conversation, a conversation that takes place in the evening between Nicodemus and Jesus, hence, "Nick at Night."

Today's Gospel is the continuation of a story about Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a powerful Jewish religious leader, who'd gone to Jesus at night because he wanted to know more about him and why God had sent him. I think he was also a bit embarrassed and didn't want the other Pharisees to know that he'd been talking to Jesus about important theological matters. So he went to him under the cloak of darkness.

After they'd had a pretty puzzling conversation about being born from above or being born again or, Jesus tried to help Nicodemus understand what his mission was all about. To do so, he reminded Nicodemus of the story their people, for they were both Jewish. He reminded them about the time when the Israelites were wandering through the desert on their way to the Promised Land after being freed from slavery in Egypt.

If you remember the story, the Israelites started complaining against God and Moses about how bad things are for them. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt just to die out here in the wilderness? There's no food and no water and we hate this miserable food that we do have." Apparently, it wasn't that they didn't HAVE food; they just didn't have what they wanted! Doesn't that sound like our kids behave sometimes? You give them chicken and broccoli but they want macaroni and cheese instead!

Anyway, when the people started their grumbling, God got fed up with them and sent poisonous snakes to bite them. I really don't like this story very much, because the idea of God punishing the people this way seems a bit over the top. Israelite impatience and complaining about food are punished by death. If we did this to our kids very few of them would ever live to be teenagers!

Well, after seeing people around them dropping like flies, the complainers finally repent and go to Moses and say they're sorry and they ask Moses to have God take the snakes away. So Moses prayed and the answer to his prayer was the lesson we heard from Numbers: "*Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.*" Moses did what God told him to do, made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a snake bit someone, that person would look at the bronze serpent and live.

In their late night conversation, Jesus reminds Nicodemus of this story and then he goes on to make a connection between that wilderness story and himself. That's where our Gospel lesson begins... *"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up..."*

In the Old Testament lesson from Numbers, the solution to the peoples' sin was for them to look at a snake raised up on a pole because the problem was poisonous snakes biting them on the ground. In the gospel, the solution to peoples' sin is a human being, namely Jesus, being raised up on a pole, the pole of the cross, so that we might look at *him* and live.

I think it's hard for us to fathom this kind of sacrifice --- that God was willing to give up God's beloved Son to be lifted up on a cross in order to save us --- to save us from our rebellious, self-indulgent ways, and from the ways we treat one another. The cross shows us that it's *us* humans who are the are the problem – and the consequences of *our* snakebites, of our sins are fatal. The wages of sin is death, says St. Paul; and death comes in so many forms.

Our sinfulness looks like men, women and children around the world living in squalor and refugee camps, or being sold as sex slaves. It looks like homeless folks sleeping out on the streets of our cities or moving around from church to church because there's not enough affordable housing. It looks like all the things in this world that divide us from one another personally and collectively and separate us from God. The cross shows us that *we* are indeed the problem. But it also shows us the depths to which God was willing to go to save us --- it gives us a glimpse into the very heart of God.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, *"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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.”*

All this week, as I've been thinking and praying about this text, a hymn from my old Methodist days kept playing in the jukebox of my mind. It's even found in our ELCA, "This Far By Faith Hymnal", which has hymns in it that are often sung in African-American congregations. It says,

*How to reach the masses, those of ev'ry birth, for an answer Jesus gave a key:*

*“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to me.”*

**Refrain:** *Lift him up, lift him up. Still he speaks from eternity:*

*“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to me.”*

*2) Oh, the world is hungry for the living bread; lift the Savior up for them to see.*

*Trust him, and do not doubt the words that he said; “I'll draw all people to me.”*

*3) Lift him up by living as a Christian ought; let the world in you the Savior see.*

*Then all will gladly follow him who once taught: “I'll draw all people to me.” Refrain*

Lift him up. That's what God allowed. God allowed Jesus to be lifted up high upon a cross so that we might see love incarnate dying in order for us to live. So that we might gaze upon the love that will never let us go; the love that with outstretched arms embraces the whole messed up, fearful, violent world --- including each and every one of us.

When I was a child, John 3:16 was one of the very first Bible verses I ever learned and memorized. It was probably the same for some of you too. In fact, John 3:16 is hands down, the most popular and beloved verse in the whole Bible. Martin Luther called it “the gospel in miniature”.

*“For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son...”* What an amazing message Jesus shared with Nicodemus in that late night conversation: That God *loved* and *gave*, and keeps on loving and giving Jesus, so that *everyone* --- you, me, your family members and mine;

the President and Congress; pimps and prisoners; doctors, soldiers and school teachers; young and old; people who dislike us and those whom we can't stand --- God loves and gives Jesus so that *everyone* who believes in him, who trusts in him and not in themselves, will not die, but have eternal life. And eternal life is not just life *after* death, but life *before* death – abundant, meaningful life lived in the presence of God, every single day.

When we're remembering God's unfathomable love, it's also important not to forget John 3:17: "*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.*" Jesus wants Nicodemus and us to understand that he was sent to bear God's saving and healing love to all the world. For God's desire is not to condemn the world but to save it, to heal it.

Too often people stay away from Christian churches because they believe that rather than being embraced by love they will be excluded by judgment. But the purpose of the church is not to judge, not to condemn, but to compassionately care for the lost and the least. We know that the church doesn't exist for our own sake; God called us into being for the sake of the world. Our mission, sisters and brothers, is to go back into the world that God so dearly loves and share Jesus' forgiving and saving love with all who are hurting, perishing and still burdened by sin. *Lift him up, lift him up. Still he speaks from eternity: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to me."* Amen.

*Rev. Gladys G. Moore*