

Today's reading once again comes from the gospel of John. You will recall last week we were also in the gospel of John where we read the story of the cleansing of the temple. Today the lectionary drops us right into the next section of text which is in the middle of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee in the temple, has come to Jesus to try to fit together the mysterious pieces of Jesus' identity. They are sitting together in the middle of the night going back and forth with Jesus explaining what it means to be born again and Nicodemus asking more questions.

We know after the cleansing of the temple the temple authorities were not pleased with Jesus. Yet, Nicodemus goes seeking out Jesus to learn more about who he claims to be and what he is doing, all in the cover of night. This is striking because Nicodemus is a person with power, a temple leader, yet he seemingly does not want to be seen by other temple leaders conversing with Jesus. Hear Jesus' response to Nicodemus in our reading from the gospel of John chapter 3 verses 14 through 21 . Listen for God's word to you this day:

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever 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 may not perish but may have eternal life.

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. ¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ 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.”

This is the word of God for the people of God...Thanks be to God.

Light is an awe-inspiring thing. When it shines just right, lands in the perfect spot, or directs our attention to details we otherwise would have missed, it has a way of transforming space and even transforming minds.

Sometimes light invites us to look up, sometimes it draws our attention downward, sometimes it calls us out of ourselves directing our focus in a new direction, light has a way of drawing us to what was previously hidden by shadows, maybe shadows in our own lives that keep us from seeing, or maybe shadows of the world that encourage us not to see.

Our passage today begins with Jesus referencing the story we heard in our first reading, the molding of a snake to be lifted up before the people in the wilderness so that when they had been bitten by a snake they would be saved. In the Numbers account, we have God, seemingly fed up with the constant complaining of the Israelites after they have been given time and time again all for which they've asked, who offers a

solution, a statue of a snake lifted up on a pedestal, but does not take away the very thing that has killed many of the Israelites, the poisonous snakes themselves. Instead, God suggests their attentions be lifted up, returned, focused upon God. God is inviting them to look past the problems before them, the things that cause them to grumble, and to shift their attention to the thing that has remained true throughout all their journey, to God abiding with them.

Nicodemus would have been familiar with this story and with its reference Jesus goes on to explain that the Son of Man, the Human One, Jesus, would be lifted up, not saving people from the world in which they live, but pointing their attentions back to God. Theologian Debie Thomas summarizes this connection well, saying: “The bronze snake of Moses’s day was not magical. It was not meant to be idolized. Neither is the cross we contemplate during this Lenten season. But insofar as the cross invites us to look up, to reorient ourselves, and to depend wholly on God to bring life out of death, light out of shadow, and healing out of pain, then the cross functions as a sacrament. A means of grace. A path to the divine.”¹ Now Jesus has the attention of Nicodemus.

Jesus then begins to describe himself and his relationship with God in what has become for us an overused and oversimplified verse. “For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” In his explanation of who he is to Nicodemus, Jesus is explaining the ways in which God desires for relationship with all people, even

¹ Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net.

those outside the Jewish tradition, he is offering an understanding of religion and faith that is more expansive, this understanding of the text is often truncated by our modern individualistic reading of this verse.

We have often understood the phrase “eternal life” to be the result of life after death, as a linear progression of life into the next realm, a reunion of sorts with God for each individual who has personal belief in Jesus. However, this phrase, “eternal life”, in Greek is written in the present tense, indicating it is a holding of life in the here and now, additionally the word eternal is more accurately translated as everlasting. This is an everlasting life, a life that begins now, and is on-going. God, through Jesus, is inviting all people to live life abundantly now.²

Jesus is sure to proclaim that none of what Jesus is about is condemnation. God did not and does not intend the life of Jesus to be used as a point of condemnation on God’s people. This is an invitation to belief and to trust in what is being offered by the Creator so that all of creation can flourish. We each are offered life abundant, but it won’t be found in our own personal salvation, that begins and ends in our individual belief in Jesus. Jesus furthers his point about how life abundant, everlasting life, eternal life begins now by turning to a story about light. “this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” First Jesus says there is belief, there is a trust in what God provides, what God lifts up and illuminates out of the shadows of the world, and then there is action, choice to “do what is true” by coming “to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that

² Rob Myallis, <http://lectionarygreek.blogspot.com/2014/01/john-31-21-nicodemus.html>.

their deeds have been done in God.” This action in the light, is a response born out of trust in and belief in the God who invites us into more than what we are capable of finding in the shadows.

Remember when this story is taking place, in the cover of night, when Nicodemus cannot be seen by the other religious authorities. His words in the first part of their encounter show that Nicodemus has an understanding that Jesus is a teacher and acts on behalf of God, but he doesn't seem to be able to draw the connection yet with how his belief in Jesus should impact his actions. Sometimes the same is true for us. We miss how it is that Jesus is inviting us into something bigger because we get focused on our own outcome. We miss the opportunities that are being illumined right before us.

Christ brings light, Christ reveals the shadows we may not have been able to see for ourselves. The shadows within ourselves that lead us into destructive paths, the shadows in the world that exist in the name of order, the shadows employed by others to distract us from God. God is giving us a way to see through the living of Jesus' life, what it means to be free of the shadow self, to be in communion with God in the fullness of who we are and the fullness of who God is. We know from Jesus himself that this doesn't mean we will have all the answers, even Jesus pleads with God for the outcome of his life to be different. And, we see from the story in Numbers that just because God offers a solution doesn't mean God will take away the problem. The shadows will always exist, the question is are we seeking the light?

Jesus draws attention to the ways the world has gotten out of order from God's intended order, the ways powers and principalities have tried to overshadow the life-

giving abundance of our Creator. Jesus is shining a light on the places that have held us stagnant, or hostage, or frozen, and offering us freedom. When our fears are illumined, we are freed from them, when our minds are allowed to imagine different ways of existing, we are freed from the limits we or others have placed on us. When our attentions are lifted up, out of whatever shadows we find surrounding us, we are able to see an offer of abundant life that we didn't realize was right before us. An offer that does not begin with death, an offer that begins right now. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus and is inviting us to imagine something different by shining a light on our places of fear, the places we long for answers and certainty. And, in so doing is showing us a new way that doesn't require condemnation of one or the other but embraces all that can be.

It may be difficult to see the light at times, sometimes it doesn't shine so directly or as brightly as we would hope for, but it is without a doubt always there. Jesus invites us to share his light with the world, to share in his life, death, and resurrection, not for our sake but for the sake of all of God's creation to be redeemed in God. When you are struggling to see that light or to figure out how to act in the light I pray that these words by Amanda Gorman's poem *The Hill We Climb* resonate with you:

"For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
If only we're brave enough to be it."

May it be so. Amen.