

Camille Cook Howe  
The Lengthening of Days  
Lent 4

March 10th, 2024  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
John 3:14-21

*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. "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. 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."*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

---

*The Game of Lent* was a board game first manufactured by Mattel in 1962. Players chose from six pieces of varying shades of grey, each representing a different vice. They took turns rolling dice and answering questions on obscure Christian dogma in an attempt to make it to the end of the forty-space-long board without giving in to temptation. Containing such classic questions as "Who begat Amminadab?" and "Which chapter of Leviticus begins, 'And the Lord spake unto Moses'?", the game was supremely unpopular and taken off the market by 1965. I would love to get my hands on a copy of that game!

What is Lent all about? Is it a game we play while trying to weave our way safely to Easter morning? If it is a game then we are on space 26 of the 40, over halfway through this long, dark board game. But what are the rules, how do you win, how do you lose, what is the end goal of the game of Lent? Now Lent is obviously not a board game, although that would be fun, it is a chance to move the spiritual needle of our lives. More than any other Christian season, in Lent we are invited to do internal work - by wrestling with our sins and facing our mortality and thinking deeply about what is meaningful in life. It is not light or easy work, but it is important that we have this annual chance to connect on a deep level with God and with our spiritual selves.

The Protestant reformer Martin Luther said something that I thought would be a good definition of the goal of Lent. Luther said, "This life... is not righteousness but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being, but becoming... We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road..." Lent is not about being something, it is about being in a season of very intentionally seeking God.

Today's scripture passage from the Gospel of John is part of what Jesus said to a man who was a seeker. A man who had questions. A man who was unsure about the way forward. A man who had doubts in his faith. A man who was in the middle of his own season of Lent. It was Nicodemus, the Pharisee, who snuck out under the cover of darkness to find and question Jesus.

Jesus teaches Nicodemus with what has become one of the most famous passages of scripture, John 3:16. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that whoever who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This passage is what Martin Luther called the “heart of the gospel, in miniature.”

But what Jesus says afterwards is equally important. “The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light. But those who do what is true come to the light.” Jesus is setting out for Nicodemus the goal of life – seek the light, rather than the darkness. This echoes the very poetic prologue of John’s Gospel with the light and darkness imagery.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.*

The prologue of John’s gospel and what Jesus says to Nicodemus is the summary of entire story of God. There was darkness and God sent the light. Some will reject the darkness. Some will embrace the light. But no matter what the darkness will never overcome the light. That is the gospel – that is the good news of Jesus. Lent feels long and dark, but Easter always comes. “What am I supposed to do?”, Nicodemus asks Jesus. Seek the light and banish the darkness. That is the journey of our faith, that is the work of Lent. More light, less darkness.

Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten* meaning, “lengthen” and refers to the lengthening days of spring. The 40 days come from the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted. In that wilderness season, Jesus showed us that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overtake the light. Jesus, the light, and the hope of the world could not be dampened – could not be destroyed by temptation, or evil, or even death. Jesus would conquer and the light would shine. That is the truth we cling to as we move through these lengthening of days, that at the end of it all there is resurrection, there is redemption, there is light. At the end of our lives there is not darkness but light because God so loved the world. That is fundamental Christian stuff – that is what our faith in Jesus promises us.

Churchill is credited with saying, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” I would like to say never let a good Lent go to waste. You only get so many Lents in your life and each one is a chance to be opened to the mysteries of God, each one is a chance to seek Jesus out again, each one is chance to bring more light into your life.

The thing to know about Nicodemus is that his encounter with Jesus really did change him. We know this because he appears two other times in the Bible. Once when he argues for Jesus to get a fair trial. And once at the death of Jesus when he brings an abundance of spices to anoint his body. I think Nicodemus came to believe that Jesus was the light and the life of the world. I believe at the end of his seeking he came to faith. If that is the case, then he won the game of Lent, arriving at Easter morning joyful knowing God’s love for him was real and that in Christ he had been given new life.

Like Nicodemus, for almost all of us, the life of faith is not linear. There are seasons of seeking, seasons of fervor, seasons of doubt, seasons of rapid growth, seasons of despair, and seasons of contented belief. We experience milestones and setbacks over the course of a lifetime, and they understandably impact our faith. But the road of becoming does not have to be straightforward. The goal of that journey is not to get all of the answers correct but the goal is to become more of who we were created to be.

The story of Nicodemus reminds us that Jesus welcomes our struggles and our questions. And how Jesus responds to Nicodemus is how Jesus responds to us – by pulling back the curtain to reveal the divine mysteries. The mystery that God so loves the world. This love may not give us a quick or simple answer to our questions. This love may not take away our pain or make everything easy. But this love will become our companion on the journey. This love will be the light that makes it possible to walk the path of faith.

Take heart and remember that the darkness does not and will not overcome the light.

Easter is coming!

Thanks be to God. Amen.