

SEEING IN THE DARK

2nd Sunday in Lent, a; March 20, 2011

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Numbers 21:4-9

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." ⁶Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:1-21

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that 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. ¹⁸Those 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. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But 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 THE LORD.

I have to admit, I'm not a very *Lenty* kind of girl. Lent has never really been my strong suit. Sacrifice and discipline and wilderness, it's just never really been my kind of thing. I'm more of an Advent kind of a person. Give me trees and lights and decorations and big red bows. But really, Pentecost is really my season. I suppose it's my day, since Pentecost is only one day in the church calendar. But that is my time, seriously. Spirit and fire and soaring doves and bright red, I mean, that is when I love worship. And it's only one day, you know. You get one chance to just make Pentecost amazing. Once a year, the birth of the church, you know. Love it.

But Lent... Lent is 40 days long. And it's not really something you can avoid. It just keeps going and going and going. If you miss one Sunday, you're still in it the next Sunday. It's hard to live out the church year and not be in Lent, but it's something that I do not look forward to.

So when I saw the scripture passage for the lectionary this week, I thought great! What a great passage for someone like me. We get to talk about the spirit! Being born from above, born of the spirit, born again. And we'll talk about John 3:16, what Martin Luther called "the gospel in miniature" — "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." — Yes! This will be great. We'll forget all about that somber Lenten stuff and just go for the hope. We'll talk about bumper stickers with this passage on it and football goalposts and Tim Tebow wearing the passage under his eye during the BCS championship. This is going to be good.

But there's one problem with that. The people who decide the lectionary, those pastors and academics who place certain passages in the season of the church, decided that we should read this hopeful passage right in the middle of Lent. And like I said, you cannot avoid Lent. This is why we have a church season, a church calendar. You ever wonder about that? Part of the reason that we have Advent and Christmas and Lent and Easter is so that we are forced to look at, forced to experience, the different seasons of our lives, the different times in our lives. The church seasons call us into a new way of looking at things, they remind of us of the ways that God works in our lives. If we are sad and depressed and hopeless, Advent comes along and says, "There is hope, born of a virgin, born in a manger, a child born for you, to give hope to the world." And we sing songs about peace and joy and love and we are reminded that if we do not know those things, if we have no peace and no hope, that Christmas is coming, and we will have a chance to start over. That's what Advent does.

And Lent does the same thing, in a way. Lent calls us into the places that are dark and upsetting and unjust, it calls us into the wilderness. And some of us can handle that. For some of us, perhaps someone like you, Lent is a time when we remember that we are not alone in the wilderness, that there are many of us who have to face these unsettling things, and that we can do it together. But for someone like me, and perhaps for someone like you, we get very uncomfortable when we have to face up to Lent. When we have to look into the wilderness, into the sadness, when we have to face it and we can't run away and avoid it. We can't put a smile on our face and hope for the best.

On the day that I graduated from college, I remember saying to myself that I was just going to smile, the whole day, and I wasn't going to let anybody know that I was terrified about leaving

college, or that I didn't have a job, or that I wanted nothing more than to just go back home with my friends and continue on the way things were. I decided to just smile, the whole day, so that no one would know what was going on inside.

We can't do that in Lent. We have to face up to the things that we have been avoiding, the things that we pretend aren't really there, the things that we keep in the darkness. Lent is our chance to shine a light on the dark places, our chance to tell the truth. To stop pretending that we didn't really want that job anyway, to stop telling others that it was a mutual break-up. Lent says that we don't have to pretend that those comments weren't hurtful, or that we didn't mess up, or that we don't need help. Lent makes us admit that there is injustice in the world, that children starve, that bombs drop, that seismic plates shift, that people are swept away. Lent is the season of the year that says, "There is darkness. Don't pretend it's not there. But let the light shine in the darkness." That may mean that we will see all of the things that we have been hiding in the dark, but we have to shine a light on what we are afraid of if we are ever going to do anything about it. Lent says the only way we will overcome these things is if we shine a light on them and see them for what they are.

I don't know how many of you have a basement, but the house I bought last year has one. Basements for me are kind of like Lent; it's just not my kind of thing. We don't have basements much in Texas. You build down 3 feet in most places in Texas and you hit rock, lots of rock. So we don't really do basements, but as I was looking at all of these old houses in Cooper Young, I learned that a lot of them have big, scary, damp basements with 100 years of stuff stored down there. When I was looking at houses, I wouldn't even go down into most of them. Having a nasty basement was the kiss of death for my realtor. But when he finally convinced me to go down and look around the basement in my house, we found all kinds of things hidden in the dark.

Some of it was a little gross, but we were able to find places in the foundation that needed attention, a problem with the air conditioning vent and some places of water damage — all things that could be fixed. And we found some cool things as well — some pieces of coal from the old fireplace and a copy of the Commercial Appeal, completely in tact, from 1925, that is now framed and hangs in my living room with a big spotlight shining on it. I would never have known it was there if we hadn't looked around. Shining a light in the darkness of my basement showed me the problems, showed me the things that needed to be fixed, and it also showed me a few unexpected gifts.

But it's not easy to shine a light in the dark and see what we've been hiding. Our text tells us as much today. Nicodemus lived in the darkness and he came to Jesus looking for a light. Nicodemus has questions; he had heard of the miracles, but he doesn't quite understand, he doesn't really know what to believe, but he wants to make the effort.

Nicodemus often gets a bad reputation in scripture, but here his questions sound like many of the same kinds of questions we might ask of Jesus. He tries to engage Jesus in a logical discussion, to get Jesus to prove and explain exactly who he is so that we — Nicodemus uses the plural — so that "we" might understand it. But Jesus will have none of it. He talks about the spirit and rebirth and God's love in that famous text in verse 16. And not surprisingly, Nicodemus doesn't understand. We can almost sense the bewildered, confused, anxious face of Nicodemus who has

taken a risk, perhaps a life-threatening risk, to meet with Jesus and to clarify, once and for all, what Jesus is saying and who exactly he is. And we presume that Nicodemus leaves the conversation more confused than he was before, pondering this discussion and yet still walking off into the darkness.

And yet if we look closely at the text, we see that Jesus does throw Nicodemus a bone, something he might understand, something that he can hang his hat on. It doesn't mean much to us, in fact, we tend to gloss over it to get to the "good stuff" in the passage, but to Nicodemus, a scholar of Israel, it would have meant a great deal. In John 3:14, Jesus references Moses and this story from the book of Numbers that we heard today.

In chapter 21 of Numbers, we hear a story that seems pretty common. The Israelites are in the wilderness and they speak out against God. God becomes angry, and as theologian Scott Hozee says, "God...sends them venomous snakes [to torment them]. Not surprisingly, the people soon make the connection between the serpents and their complaints. So they confess to Moses, who...intercedes on the people's behalf. Curiously, however, God doesn't do what you expect: namely, just make the snakes disappear. God's startling solution is to [have] Moses make a bronze serpent, raise it up on a high pole, and then [have] the people to look at it [so that they may be healed. They have] to look at this artificial serpent as the cure for the bite of a real serpent.

That's [pretty] strange. If God sent the snakes... then presumably [God] could have also sent them away. That's the logical request the people ask Moses to make. But instead God gives these other instructions. [The Israelites have to look at] an image of what ailed them in order to get cured of what ailed them."¹ One scholar² says that looking at the bronze serpent is like taking a vaccine. By ingesting a small amount of what hurts us, we in fact give our bodies an opportunity to fight off the sickness. In Numbers, God makes the Israelites look straight into the face of what is hurting them, and somehow, by looking into the face of the serpent, the Israelites are healed.

And it's this reference that Jesus gives to Nicodemus. Jesus says that he is like that bronze serpent, that he must be lifted up, just as Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness. Jesus says to Nicodemus that when we are in the wilderness, when we are in the dark, we have to shine a light so that we can see clearly what's around us, what's going on in our basement. But when we do that, when we let the light in, we see that Christ has already been there, plugging up the leaks and fixing the cracks in the foundation. That is how we are healed. Just as the Israelites were healed when they looked at what was hurting them, we are healed of our suffering when we see plainly that Jesus has suffered, too.

Not surprisingly, Nicodemus doesn't seem to get it in the moment, but this is not the last time we will hear from Nicodemus in John. It takes him most of the Gospel of John to get it, but we see Nicodemus twice more in this Gospel — once at Jesus's trial, where he tries to give Jesus an opportunity to defend himself, yet again relying on logic and reason that doesn't really seem to work. And yet the third time we see Nicodemus is when he assists Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus. Here, it would seem that Nicodemus finally gets the lesson of Moses in this passage. He willingly enters into the darkness of the tomb and prepares the body of Jesus for burial.

Nicodemus finally understands that you have to be willing to let a light shine on the suffering and trust that Jesus has been there before, cleaning it all up. That is how we see in the dark.

Like the Israelites, we might expect that God can simply take away the things that are hurting us, the snakes in our lives that bite at us and tear us down and threaten to hurt us. But God says, no, that's not how we are healed. The darkness is real, and it is frightening. We cannot lock the door and pretend that it isn't there. But Lent is our chance to shine the light in the darkness, to venture into the basement and see what's really going on. Joan Chittister says that, "Lent is a call to weep for what we could have been and are not. Lent is the grace to grieve for what we should have done and did not. Lent is the opportunity to change what we ought to change but have not. Lent is not about penance. Lent is about becoming, doing and changing whatever it is that is blocking the fullness of life in us right now."

Friends, don't be afraid of the basement. Don't prefer the darkness. Shine a light in the dark places so that we can see clearly what God's love has already been doing. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

Amen.

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¹ <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/viewArticle.php?aID=191>

² See Neal Plantinga