

A Meditation for Mar 5/23, 'The 2nd Sunday of Lent' – pg. 1

By the Rev. Warren Ball of Mt. Albert United Church

Hello, welcome! Today, we 'open' John's gospel for the first of four weeks before we return to Matthew on Palm/Passion Sunday, April 2/23. Bible scholars are quick to point out that John, of all the gospels, represents the latest in the developing thought about Jesus' ministry from the First Century. Yet this gospel also has much that just can't be read directly into our 21st Century. What a muddle! Yet what a great opportunity John gives us this Lent to struggle with our heritage and, thereby, come to Easter anew this year. Well, let's begin today's spiritual journey by turning to God in prayer:

God of all compassion:

**help us to search for your gifts,
then help us to walk with courage their holy path,
and all so that we may come to know the radiant life
you have shown us in Christ. Amen.**

Today's Scripture reading: *from* John 3:1-17 'Nicodemus visits Jesus' (NRSV)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, one of the Temple's leaders. He came to Jesus by night, saying, "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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus replied, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The 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."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand? 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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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."

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'Let go; let God!'

God of Lenten journey: send your spirit deep into our awareness now – open our eyes; open our ears; open our hands to serve. This we pray in the name of your love, amen.

He's a tall, distinguished, very important man and this morning it's as though he's right here with us! Not that we could recognize him, because he's taken great pains to hide his identity, and be anonymous. In fact, this is so tricky that I have to wonder, could we be him? Now he's moving down the unlit back streets, flitting from shadow to shadow, unnoticed, unseen, invisible as the wind. You see, this man named Nicodemus is on his way to see Jesus, for Nicodemus has questions for this person whom everyone is talking about. However, Nicodemus can't ask those questions in the broad light of day, because that would have cost him too much in terms of his image and reputation. Do we sometimes hide what we believe out of fear that it'll cost us in one way or another? So, to some particularly Lenten questions for you and me this morning. Do we hide our questions in fear? Fear that those questions will cost us? Fear that those questions will take us to places we're afraid to go? Well, regardless of how we answer those questions, the fact remains that, trapped in his way of thinking, poor old Nicodemus can't even begin to understand what it is that Jesus tells him. Oh no, poor Nicodemus just doesn't 'get it' at all!

And yet, isn't it the case that John's gospel just doesn't really give Nicodemus much of a chance at all? In fact, isn't it the case that poor old Nicodemus is painted into a corner with this narrative? And, so, we recall that John's gospel, above all the gospels, bears painful witness to the way that Christianity evolved, or grew out of, Judaism. Those first few generations of Christians were scared silly, and deeply scarred, by the split through which they had gone. And, so, we also recall that there is much in the gospel of John that shouldn't be read into our very different situations unless we also understand something of the horribly contentious birth that Christianity had for the community of John.

For example, it's only too easy to make fun of Nicodemus all these years later as he stammers, splutters, and looks so foolish in front of Jesus. But, oh, let's not do that! You see, despite all the changes that have taken place over the last 20 centuries, I don't believe that humans have gotten any better at all when it comes to 'getting it' – we're no better than Nicodemus was. There are just as many people who flit from shadow to shadow, hoping to hide their true beliefs or motives. There are just as many people who cut deals in the dark away from the scrutiny of popular consent. There are just as many people who, blinded by their egos, can't recognize the truth even when it's right in front of them.

I remember reading about a situation back in the 1920's, the 'Roaring Twenties,' when Charlie Chaplin was one of the most popular people of the day. In fact, Charlie was so popular that one of the greatest fads of that era were contests to see who could best imitate Charlie. Well, at one point in time, apparently Charlie Chaplin himself decided to enter one of those contests, and the judges rated eleven other people as doing a better job of being

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Charlie Chaplin than Charlie Chaplin himself! Oh, we humans today are as bad at ‘getting it’ as we’ve ever been, despite all our so-called progress.

But John’s gospel, despite all of its ‘baggage,’ goes on to make a point about all this that is pure, unadulterated gold. I’m referring here to when John makes the claim that we don’t have to “get it” before God gives it! We don’t have to understand how God’s love works before that love can make a huge difference in our lives. You see, God loves this world so much, God loves you and me so much, that Jesus, the spirit of love, came, and comes yet, that no one need perish, but all can have a life that is abundant! The great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, called that single verse (John 3:16) the “entire New Testament in a nutshell.” This stuff is for keeps, folks! And it will keep us through whatever we face in life. It’s a love that will never let us go and will always meet our needs. Now, note that I said needs. They’re not always the same as what we want, are they?

A Traveller was once walking down a country lane. As he looked out over the fields, he saw something caught his eye. You see, there was a farmer pumping water at an old-fashioned hand-pump. I guess there’s nothing particularly unusual about that in a country field from times gone by, yet there was something about this scene that just didn’t look right to the Traveller. And, as he approached the cistern, the truth came to light. You see, it wasn’t the man whose pumping was bringing water up to field from far below. It was the pressure from an artesian spring far below the surface that was actually driving the pump. The hands at the pump handle weren’t priming the pump, it was the water pressure from far below that was animating what turned out to be a scarecrow manikin that had been draped around a pump frame.

Well, on this second Sunday in the season of Lent, it can be just like that with our lives! You see, since God has already accepted us, we can simply accept our Christian good news on faith. And since God has already forgiven us, we can forgive others, and don’t have to carry those burdens any longer. In fact, since God has already blessed us, we’re free to be become blessings for the world. We don’t have to worry about what to say. Oh, no, we can just use God’s ideas and words. And we don’t have to wonder about the future. Oh, no, we can learn to trust that tomorrow is viewed best when we place it in God’s hands. We don’t have to make our own compass to steer our way through life’s complexities. Oh, no, we can steer our way through life with God’s eternal compass of love. All that we have to do is let go, and let God. We can let go and let God’s love drive our lives just as that artesian well once drove a manikin!

Oh, let’s hang on to that idea as we walk the Lenten Road – let go; let God! – for that’s an idea that will hold on to us till we get to Easter and beyond.

Thanks be to God? Oh, yes – thanks be to God, amen.

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Come, let us turn back to God now in prayer; come, let us pray:

O God of our Lenten journeys, you are beyond our understanding, yet you dwell within us. You are the source of life, yet in your love we are born again. You are the power behind all that is good, yet your goodness is about giving power away. Come, Holy One, meet us in the midst of our burdens, confusion, and fear. Come, Holy One, lead us as we walk the Lenten Road that lies before us! Come, claim us as your people all over again.

And help us, God, to convert our stumbling blocks into building blocks such that we can raise the structures of our lives closer to you. Help us to stretch our hearts that they may hold more and yet more of your forgiveness and self-giving love. Help us, God, to journey through acts of faith such that our lives become living temples for your grace. Help us, God, to find a spiritual rebirth so that we can learn to see you with the eyes of faith – hear our prayers, O God; come, and meet with us now!

We pray now for all who are facing difficulty this day and we pray, too, for all the places where there's difficulty. And, from within our church family, O God, we pray again for Dave Kelly, that all of his cancer treatments will enable him in time to live cancer free. So, too, we continue to pray for Wayne Kett, and his family, as he struggles his long struggle with pulmonary fibrosis. We also pray for Jean Clark, recovering at home from hip surgery, that she may find strength and healing.

In the silence of the next moments, O God, receive the deep burdens that our spirits bear today: *moment of silence*. All of this, God, and all that can't be named in word, we offer to you as we take now the words that Jesus taught us, and pray together the traditional choral version of Christ's Prayer at VU960:

Our Father, who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever, amen.

Bless us as we walk this year's Lenten Road, God – help us to really let go and let God!
Amen.