

Year B Fourth Sunday in Lent 2024 Letting Go John 3 vv14 to 21

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, has come to Jesus at nighttime to talk with him. Nicodemus believes Jesus is from God, he says, and he wants to learn more *from* him and *about* him. He is confused about how to fit the teachings of Jesus into what he already knows, into what he and the other Pharisees teach the people. His nighttime chat doesn't seem to ease his confusion though. He leaves feeling even more confused. It is during their conversation that we have *this* well-known misunderstanding: Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born from above and Nicodemus thinks he is saying he must somehow be born again, coming out of his mother's womb for a second time. It really is almost a deliberate misunderstanding. Nicodemus doesn't want to truly understand what Jesus is saying. Why not? The Good News that Jesus is proclaiming – the good news that God's kingdom is here – demands that Nicodemus let go of all that he has accomplished and understood – let go and become like a newborn, ready to receive the world on completely new terms. What Jesus is proclaiming is not *hard* to understand but it is hard to follow. Following Jesus, living life in God's kingdom, requires a lot of letting go.

Jesus first tells Nicodemus, and us, that he is like the serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness (see Numbers 21:9). In the story from Numbers, God sent poisonous serpents into the Israelite camp as punishment for the people complaining against God. When the people repented, God told Moses to make a serpent out of bronze and lift it on a pole, so that anyone bitten by a serpent could look at the bronze replica and live. This doesn't mean that the replica of a snake on a pole had magical healing powers. The point was that the people had turned away from God – their hearts were desiring the alluring power of empire. Turning to the snake

represented the turning of their hearts and minds back to God, back to reliance and trust in God.

In the same way that the serpent was lifted on a pole, “so must the Son of Man be lifted up” Jesus says. John is referring to more than just the physical lifting up of Jesus on the cross. The word John uses for “lifted up” also means “to exalt – to glorify”. For John, Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension are part of one great action of God to raise Jesus up in glory, to give to Jesus the place of honour and authority right beside God. Yet, in human thinking, death on a cross is a moment of profound humiliation and defeat and so, just as the Israelites in the wilderness were required to look upon the very thing that causes death in order to receive life, we look upon the ultimate of human humiliation and know that it leads to God’s glorification.

This is the way, Jesus explains, this is the way in which God shows his love for the world, the beautiful world God created. God is going to save this world. “World” means more than the creation though, more than the natural world. World – *kosmos* – means the decoration as well, all of the human made systems and institutions that we have added on top of God’s creation. Everything that comes out of humanity is imperfect, even when we begin with good intentions. There is much brokenness in our systems and institutions – including in the Church – and God is going to save those as well. That word “save”, God’s “salvation”, is the word that means “to rescue, to make whole, to heal.” God is mending the brokenness of this world and God is doing this by giving his Son to the world.

The word “give” here is very interesting. We may think God giving us his son means God handed over his Son to be killed but that is jumping to conclusions because we

know how things turn out. If *all* that needed to happen was the crucifixion of Jesus to reconcile all things to God, then we could have just skipped right to it: Here's my Son, lead him to the slaughter. The word "give" in the phrase "God gave his Son" has the very specific meaning of giving one to someone to care for their interests. God gives Jesus to us to care for our interests. For you see, says Jesus, I've not come among you to judge you – to distinguish between who is in and who is not in God's kingdom. I'm here to give everyone the opportunity to be made whole, to choose life in God's kingdom.

Those who believe in the Son will have eternal life, he declares. There is also something important you should know about that phrase "eternal life". The Greek word used for life is *zoe* – meaning both physical life and spiritual life. The word "eternal" comes from the word that we pronounce as "eon" – an age, a particular period of time. The word eternal describes the quality, the characteristic, of life in an age. "Eternal" does not focus on the future *per se*, but rather on the quality of the age ([165](#) /aión) it relates to. So, believers live in "eternal ([166](#) /aiónios) life" right now, experiencing this *quality of God's life* now as a *present possession* (<https://biblehub.com/greek/166.htm>). This is the same amazing message that Paul gives us: God *has* raised us up, has *already* seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 2:6). Jesus did not teach people how to die. Jesus taught people how to *live*. He showed, and he taught people how to live in God's kingdom because God's kingdom *is* here and we have had the door opened to us through the baptism of Jesus brought to completion through his death and resurrection. The kingdom life is ours to choose right now. How do we obtain this kingdom life?

That brings us to the word "believe". We tend to think of believing as a thing we do entirely with our brains. Believing is simply our "yes" that something is true. We, in

fact, often use the words “think” and “believe” interchangeably: I believe you’re a good person. I think you’re a good person. I believe Jesus lived, died on a cross, and lives again through the power of God. I believe. That was easy. I’m in, right? Well, the Greek word for “believe” does not let us off the hook so easily. To believe (*piste*) is to have faith such that we entrust ourselves – our whole selves – to God. This means that if we believe in Jesus Christ we must live differently than if we did not believe. The belief Jesus speaks of today, is active. Entrusting ourselves into the care of God is absolutely not as easy as it is to say those words. That is what the Israelites discovered in the wilderness. They felt abandoned and frightened that would not have what they needed to survive. They expressed their fear and God provided water. They expressed their fear and God provided manna. Again, they expressed their fear and God provided meat. They could not let go of their reliance on themselves and on human created systems of provision. They put trust and reliance in the world above trust and reliance in God. We may hear the story of the Israelites and think to ourselves, “How could you *not* have faith in God when he was providing you with manna every morning?” Yet we do the exact same thing as the Israelites. I heard the amazing story of a modern day journey in the wilderness. The Rev. Canon Vincent Solomon was our speaker on last Wednesday’s Moosonee Bible Study. He was traveling to Winnipeg, he said, to go to university. As an indigenous person, he experienced the animosity and discrimination that was prevalent in Winnipeg at that time. He could not feel God’s presence and felt abandoned. A few years later, when he found himself on a bus, traveling back into the city “Kicking and screaming”, he said – feeling called by God but not at all wanting to go, he said to God: You know, if you want me to be here, you’re going to have to provide me with a place to live. And before he’d even finished his sentence, his cell phone rang.

A friend of friend was offering him a place to live. He was provided with a job serving tables in a small downtown restaurant and made great money on tips but he still felt abandoned by God in the unfriendly, sometimes hostile environment. On a particularly bad day, ready to give up everything and leave town, a very old man walked into the restaurant and sat at one of his tables. This old man just stared at him. Vincent went to the table and asked if he could get the man something. Coffee was all he wanted. And, as he drank the coffee, he continued to stare at Vincent. Feeling uncomfortable and irritated, Vincent went back and asked if there were anything else he could get for the man. No, I'm good, said the man. But then he continued. "You know, I never come in here but today, God told me to come in here and to tell you that you're doing a good job. He's proud of you." Shocked and confused, Vincent left the table. He realized he hadn't even said thank you. So, he looked to the spot where the old man had been sitting. Money was on the table for the coffee and the man was headed to the door. Vincent hurried after and, just as the door clicked shut behind the old man, Vincent yanked it open again to say his thanks but the man was not there. The sidewalk was empty. We live in the presence of God, cared for by God.

Shifting our faith in the world into faith in God doesn't mean giving up all of our worldly goods and financial income then sitting back expecting manna to appear on our front lawn each morning. It is to let go of fear and of the desire for what the world tells us to desire. It is to trust ourselves to God's care, to rely on God for our needs, to realize – then consistently and continuously acknowledge – that all that we are and all that we have comes from God's great abundance. It is seeking first God's kingdom and trusting that all the rest that we need will follow. It is loving God *first* in the confidence that all our love for others then flows from God's perfect

love. Belief in God is a letting go of a way of thinking and being that we have been part of for a very long time. This is not easy. Remember, an intelligent and accomplished Pharisee left his encounter with Jesus scratching his head in bewilderment as he went back out into the darkness. Trust in Jesus is not simply believing events that happened a long time ago but is also letting our lives be transformed by the Jesus we meet in this story. In the words of Lance Pape, Professor of Homiletics:

1) Placing our trust in this Jesus means withholding our ultimate loyalty and trust from *other* things that ask us to pledge our allegiance. Remembering that he was publicly executed as an enemy of empire, we must be honest with ourselves about the subtle ways we are complicit in and benefit from imperial coercion. The “lifting up” of Jesus on a Roman cross places ever before us the question of who and what we will serve.

2) Placing our trust in this Jesus means noticing that the new life Jesus offered was especially difficult for the religiously accomplished. We must recognize and end any self-satisfied religiousness that is a barrier to our understanding of the new things Jesus offers and asks of us. The “lifting up” of Jesus is a stumbling block for those obsessed with religious decorum and conformity to tradition, who are comfortable with those things and fearful of change.

3) Placing our trust in this Jesus means confronting the inconvenient truth that God’s purposes for those God loves are not in sync with our own common-sense values of happiness, health, and safety. The trail of faith that Jesus blazed reveals that, while there is nothing in this world worth killing for, there are things worth dying for. The “lifting up” of Jesus reminds us that the true life God has promised us

is not the life that we can secure for ourselves through self-interest and caution (workingpreacher.org).

We each must ask ourselves if we are like Nicodemus in this story, coming to Jesus in darkness, not telling other people, and leaving Jesus' presence without changing anything about ourselves and our lives. In the end, Nicodemus chooses to enter life in God's kingdom, to come to the light, to claim Jesus' body from the cross and let his fellow Pharisees clearly see that he is participating in the work of God accomplished in Christ. Letting go and allowing our lives to daily be transformed, to live more and more the ways of God's kingdom, is – through Lent and beyond – a choice we must think about. Are we seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6)?

In this way, God showed his love for the world, that he gave his Son to care for our interests, to give everyone the opportunity to turn to God. Everyone who lives a life of trust and reliance on God, desiring the kingdom above all else, will have life with God in God's kingdom now and forever.