

2 Lent Year A

Lections: Gen. 12:1-4a; Ps. 121; Rom. 4:1-5,13-17; John 3:1-17

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Good morning Grace Church! It is a joy to break open the Word with you this morning, the second Sunday in our Lenten journey with Jesus on his way to the cross, the tomb, and beyond.

Our Gospel reading today—and for the next four Sundays—comes from the Gospel of John. Since the beginning of Advent until now, the Lectionary has mostly given us readings from Matthew, but each of the four Gospels had a different audience. And so, like all good communicators, the evangelists present their narratives of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection differently in order to best reach that audience.

As some of you might know, the Gospel of John was written during a time of war and catastrophe for the political and religious leaders of the land of Judea, the city of Jerusalem, and their inhabitants, which our translation renders, “the Jews.”

It is important to remember that Jesus, John, the other disciples, and the earliest communities who gathered around them were themselves ethnically and religiously Jewish. In those early days, they read the same Scriptures, they kept the same rituals, and they honored the same ancestors, like Abraham and Moses. The major difference, and it is major, is that the Christian Jews believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Christ, while their neighbors and friends, and in some cases, their own family members, did not. Christian Jews during the time the Gospels were written were a minority of a minority, clinging to their faith and trust in Jesus in the face of discrimination by the non-Christian majority of their fellow Jews and outright oppression by the Roman imperial government.

I say all of this as preface because as we move through the Gospel of John this Lent, culminating in our Good Friday remembrance of Jesus’s crucifixion, it is vitally important that we remember that the tables have been flipped for some 1700 years. It is now our Jewish siblings who are a distinct minority, who have faced horrific oppression, even genocide, by Christians through the centuries, and who, even now, in the year 2023, in the United States, even in Newton, Massachusetts, face reinvigorated antisemitic accusations, slurs, and even violence.

So, even as we continue to have a very profound theological difference with our Jewish friends and neighbors—foremost that we Christians continue to profess that Jesus, a faithful Jew, a son of Abraham, a man called rabbi by his followers, is our Messiah, the Son of God—when we hear mention of “the Jews” in John’s Gospel and other parts of the New Testament, we must constantly examine ourselves so that our differences do not lead to envy, fear, resentment, anger, or any kind of hate.

With that said, when looking at Jesus’s exchange with Nicodemus in our reading from John this morning, it becomes clear why that difference arose in the first place. As I mentioned last week, Jesus is starting to reveal and disclose his truest identity to others.

He is risking vulnerability in order that they, and by extension, we who hear these words today, might start to trust him when he claims to be someone extraordinary, not just any teacher or prophet sent from God, but God's very own self, who comes to help us see the reign of God springing up all around us. Through this exchange with Nicodemus today, and then with the Samaritan woman at the well, the blind man he heals, and finally, with Martha and Mary as he raises their brother Lazarus from the dead, Jesus keeps doubling down on showing us who he really is: the Son of God promised to save all of creation because of and through infinite, death-defying love.

But here, near the beginning of his ministry, so far Jesus has performed only one miracle, turning water into wine at a wedding feast and one prophetic act of "cleansing the temple" of exploitative animal-sellers and money-changers. And yet, even that brief biography is enough to entice, Nicodemus, a member of the political and religious elite, to meet with this itinerant rabbi from Galilee.

Interestingly, Nicodemus will be a recurring character in John's Gospel, finally mourning Jesus's death and demonstrating the arc of how one becomes a disciple, a follower of Jesus, starting with curiosity, albeit sprinkled with understandable confusion.

And this, I think, is where this particular passage has something to offer us, today. Because even if we have been Christians practically all our lives, as many of us have, to be a disciple is not something one is born into. Rather, to be a disciple is to make a choice—an ongoing, continuous choice to believe—to trust—that the Jesus we encounter in Scripture, in sacrament, and in our souls is sent from the heavenly, spiritual realm.

One thing that helps me trust that the Jesus of John's Gospel is who he claims to be is that this Jesus sees the true state of this physical and limited reality the evangelist calls "the world." As biblical scholar Ronald J. Allen puts it: "the world [in John]" or as we might say today, the universe or the cosmos, "is a lower...sphere [characterized by] hate, darkness, falsehood, slavery, and scarcity...that lives in pain with only partial knowledge of God" and that is marked by death.¹ That is what it means to be born of flesh and to remain of the flesh.

Even now, despite all of humanity's "progress," with our immense scientific knowledge, technological advances, and attempts at equality, you don't have to look very far to see that hate, ignorance, lies, slavery, and scarcity still hold sway and that death still has the final word. After all, I need only mention nouns like Ukraine, Syria, fake news, George Floyd, COVID—I could go on.

So yes, Jesus speaks the truth about earthly things, about the sad state of this world, this cosmos, and that helps me trust him. But he also sees that it is not the whole truth. Because the whole truth, dear church, is that God loves this world that They made. God, the God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, the God who promised childless Abraham and Sarah that they would bless all the families of the earth, They love this world so much They will save it.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-31-17-11>

And we get to be part of this salvation, this liberation, from those forces of hate and ignorance, of lying, slavery, and scarcity. We do it by starting to trust Jesus, by accepting, deep in our hearts, that we *are* born from above by water and Spirit. So, my friends, bring all your confusion, your questions, even your doubts, to Jesus. And thus, choose to be his disciples, again and again. Amen.