

The Second Sunday in Lent
March 19-20, 2011
John 3:1-17

“On the Lenten Road: In the Night”

When we're traveling, there are usually places along the way that we'll stop at – sometimes these are planned, and sometimes they're not. We may have our entire journey all mapped out, including where we want to stop and when. We might want to take in different points of interest along the way. We may want to stop and see family or friends in route to our destination. Sometimes there are unplanned stops along the way – we get sick or there's car trouble. It's that image of being on the road that is our focus for Sunday sermons in Lent. This Lenten road that we are traveling on began last Sunday with our first stop – the desert. In the desert, we witnessed how Jesus endured temptation from Satan, just as we do. But unlike us, Jesus did not give in to the temptations, but conquered both tempter and temptation. Today, our next stop on the Lenten road is not so much a place, but a time: in the night. In the night, under cover of darkness, at some undisclosed location in Jerusalem, a man named Nicodemus comes to Jesus and learns about what it means to be born again; to be born of water and the Spirit. May the Lord's rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

The Scripture lessons for this Second Sunday in Lent speak of being on the road; on a journey. In today's Old Testament lesson (Genesis 12:1-9), Abraham was called by God to leave his comfortable and familiar life behind and hit the road: **“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show’**” (Genesis 12:1). God promises to make of Abram a great nation, and that in him all families of the earth would be blessed. Without question, Abram obeyed the Lord. Today's Epistle lesson (Romans 4:1-5, 13-17) speaks of how Abram's faith and trust in God's promise was what justified him before the Lord. Though he himself was an old man, and his wife was well beyond the age of child bearing, and though they owned not a square foot of land in this new place God was taking them, yet Abram believed that God would make it happen. As Scripture tells us: **“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”** (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3). That is faith, as God's Word tells us: **“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”** (Hebrews 11:1). That faith in God, in the assurance of things hoped and the conviction of things not seen, can take us to places that we would never have imagined and would never have chosen for ourselves. But you see, it is the Lord God who is leading us on this Lenten road. Better fasten your seat belt and hold on! It could be a very interesting journey ahead.

In the night, Nicodemus comes to Jesus. It's only here in John's Gospel that we encounter this man, who was a member of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin. We hear of him again when he hesitantly speaks in defense of Jesus after the authorities tried to arrest (John 7:50-52). He is not recorded as saying anything at Jesus' trial, but did assist Joseph of Arimathea at the burial of Jesus (John 19:39). Perhaps Nicodemus was searching for the truth, but was a timid man who feared the opinions of others. And perhaps because of this he came to Jesus by night, when he would not be seen by others. But maybe it goes deeper than this. Maybe John is contrasting the darkness not just of the night, but the darkness of life apart from God's Son. Jesus is the Light of the world, and apart from him all is darkness (John 8:12). Apart from Jesus, all of our searching and striving remains as dark as night.

Jesus gets right to the heart of it all: **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”** (John 3:3, 5). This is a new birth, and it is outside of our control. Clearly Jesus is speaking of Baptism, but Nicodemus is thoroughly confused. Until that Spirit who comes to us in the cleansing waters of holy Baptism unlocks the darkness of our hearts and minds, we also are thoroughly confused. Our thinking and speaking – our whole life – is rooted in self, in the flesh, in sin, rather than in the Spirit and in the ways of God. We must be born again – reborn from above by the Spirit.

The most familiar passage from Scripture is found in today’s Gospel lesson: **“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”** (John 3:16). Sometimes called “the Gospel in a nutshell,” this is the message of the entire Scriptures reduced to one verse. Nicodemus and his fellow Israelites would admit that God loved Israel, his chosen people. But to think that God loved *the world*? That was almost abhorrent. How could God love the entire world? God loved and still loves the world because God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). It is his nature to love; that is who God is. And God’s love is not just a sweetly sentimental feeling. God’s love is a love that costs. It cost God what was most dear and precious to him: the life of his only Son. Our eyes and the eyes of the world have been fixed on the nation of Japan, struggling in the aftermath of earthquakes, tsunami, and now nuclear crisis. Did you see the front page above-the-fold photo from Friday’s *Washington Post* (3-18-11)? It is a heartbreaking image of a man weeping beside a pile of debris under which his mother’s body is buried. That sorrow, that grief, is an image of our God who so loved the world. Over a world steeped in the pain, fear, and brokenness of sin, our God weeps. And do we? Do we share in our God’s sorrow and tears over his creation? It is because of our God’s great love and concern for the world He made that He sent his only begotten Son to offer his life as the atoning sacrifice for sin – the sin of the world – upon the cross. **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”** (John 3:17). Elsewhere in Scripture, we read that Jesus did come into the world “for judgment” (John 9:39). How do we resolve this? They are two sides of the same coin. Jesus’ coming into the world was for salvation; however, salvation for all who believe means judgment for all who do not. This is a solemn truth and we cannot escape it. The truth is that some will be condemned because of Christ’s coming into the world, but this was not the purpose of his coming. The purpose of Jesus’ coming was and is **“... that the world might be saved through him”** (John 3:17). This is the message of life and salvation that we hold fast to, and that we hold up before the world.

On this Lenten road, on this Second Sunday in Lent, we give thanks and praise to God for loving the world and for sending his Son that we might be saved through him. Amen.