

Lectionary A March 12, 2017 The 2nd Sunday in Lent
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, Indiana
Pastor Roberta Meyer

Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
Gospel: John 3:1-17

Why?

So, I wonder, was Nicodemus brave for sneaking out in the night to talk to Jesus, when everyone in his circle didn't like Jesus, or was he a coward, for sneaking out in the night to talk to Jesus so none of his friends would see him? Maybe a little of both. He recognized Jesus had something special. He said, "*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.*" I notice one thing in Nicodemus' statement, though. He says "we". Is he repeating a conversation he had with fellow Pharisees? Did they all recognize that Jesus must be from God, but weren't willing to admit it? Was Nicodemus the one brave enough to go find Jesus and ask him about it? Was he the one not afraid to face the very foreign truth this Jesus is proclaiming?

But why in the night? Nicodemus had to protect himself, right? What if his colleagues saw him talking to this radical teacher? Maybe he wasn't ready for the consequences. But that didn't keep him from seeking Jesus out, even if it was in the dark.

I think he got what he expected, and actually wanted—more outlandish, radical teachings from Jesus. All this talk about being born from above—Nicodemus had a hard time wrapping his head around it. But Jesus answered him, "*Do 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.*" Nicodemus, did you hear Jesus? It's not about you making sense of it in your mind. Some things you just have to believe. But that means trusting someone bigger than yourself. That means having faith in a power that knows more than you.

My three-year-old granddaughter is in the "Why?" stage. No matter what her question is, or my answer, she comes back with another "Why?" I have to admit at times I get a little frustrated with her constant questions, and I just say, "Because I say so."

Sometimes I am pretty sure that is the reason she is asking me these questions. Not that she wants an answer, but because she really doesn't want there to be an answer. Is that what Nicodemus is up to. He is safe as long as he stays in this familiar "darkness," so he keeps questioning Jesus, to keep the scary truth from seeping in. If Nicodemus took Jesus at his word without questioning him—well, that would change this cautious Pharisee's whole life! That was plain scary.

Then Jesus says the most frightening thing of all. "*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.*" Now

we are very familiar with this verse. It is one of the most popular verses in the Bible. Martin Luther called it “the Gospel in miniature.” We say it and are comforted by it, but we don’t realize how foreign and unnerving this statement was for Nicodemus and his Pharisee friends. Especially when we don’t stop at verse 16 but let Jesus finish his thoughts by listening to verse 17, too. *“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.”*

Commentator, David Lose, points out that “that the Greek word for “world” – *kosmos* – designates throughout the rest of John’s Gospel an entity that is hostile to God.” In John 15, Jesus says, *“If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.”* And statements like that are in John 16 and 17, also. So, “we might actually translate these verses, “For God so loved the God-hating world, that he gave his only Son...” and “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn even this world that despises God but instead so that the world that rejects God might still be saved through him.” Really – God’s love is just that audacious and unexpected!” Can you see why Nicodemus was sneaking in the dark? Jesus just took all the lines drawn saying who’s in and who’s out, and threw them out the window.

And what about us? Do we really hear Jesus’ words for us in today’s world? What an appropriate time to really hear how expansive God’s love is. Look at the bigotry and hatred flaring up with attacks against Jews and Muslims lately in our country—and the racism that keeps its ugly head reared up. Not to mention the constant shunning and persecution that the LGBTQ folks endure on a daily basis. God’s love is for everyone. And here is the part I have a hard time with—God’s love is also for those who hate and shun others. That fact there makes me want to hide in the dark.

. But here is the radical, audacious truth of Jesus Christ. If God’s love is for all, then we who have experienced that love in Christ are called to see persons who aren’t like us, who don’t think like us, who are of other faiths (and no faith) through the lens of that profound and surprising love. That includes those who are perpetuating hate and fear. This doesn’t mean that we condone or tolerate hatred, but it does mean that we do not retaliate with hate ourselves. Jesus demonstrated that very thing to us from the cross. *“Forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”*

This is the time for us to illuminate darkness and shine our lights of God’s unconditional love where everyone can see. However, let’s not go into this without fully understanding what we are getting ourselves into. Showing this world that God’s love goes beyond boundaries, beyond religion, nationality, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, beyond political party lines, or any of those human lines drawn in the sand, has consequences. This unconditional Love’s light is too bright for some people. When we welcome the immigrants and refugees, some will not like it. When we openly welcome those of a variety of sexual orientations to come be a part of our worshipping community, some will call it an abomination. When we love and pray for those who disagree with us politically we will be criticized. How does Jesus want us to respond to the negativity we receive? With Love.

Why? Well, *“For God so loved the world that he gave...and gave...and gave...and still gives.* Why? So we *“may have eternal life.”* Why? Because God says so. Thanks be to God! Amen.