

## **Year A, Lent 2**

Genesis 12:1-4a

Romans 4:1-5, 3-17

John 3:1-17

Psalm 121

A Pharisee - a well-educated, connected, influential religious man - comes to Jesus at night. He comes at night perhaps to avoid the disapproval of his peers, perhaps because it's the only time he can get a one-on-one with Jesus. But he comes at night. He is literally and figuratively in the dark. He does not know who Jesus is.

This Pharisee, Nicodemus, sees Jesus as a miracle worker and a teacher. He says: "We know that you are a teacher come from God, because no one can do the signs that you do apart from God."

In that way, Nicodemus is like many people. Some of us may believe Jesus to be a miracle worker and teacher - a good man who shows us who God is. Maybe we're not so sure if he is anything more than that.

Yet believing that Jesus is a teacher is actually a great start - because he will teach you. He will teach you who he is. And that's what he does for Nicodemus: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born from above." Born from above. The Greek word for "above" also means "again." They are both true. Nicodemus doesn't understand how someone can be born a second time.

Jesus replies: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." Jesus is talking about another kind of birth. A birth of water and Spirit. At the dawn of creation, Genesis describes "a wind, a breath, a Spirit," God's ruach, hovering over the waters. Life bursting from the darkness. At Jesus' baptism, he descends into the waters of creation and as he emerges the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove and the voice of the Lord speaks. Heaven breaks in.

Just so, Jesus says, what you need is for heaven to break in and re-create you.

Nicodemus asks: How can these things be? Jesus tells him. Do not be astonished. This is the work of the Spirit, the wind. It is God's work. He blows where he chooses. At this moment he is blowing on Nicodemus - perhaps on you too.

**Then Jesus shares the life-giving news: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son in order that those who believe in him may not perish but have everlasting life."**

This is a popular verse. It's printed on billboards, on posters at football games, on note cards and mugs. We memorized it in Sunday school when we were five years old and

invited Jesus into our hearts. For some of us it never gets old.

Yet some can't help but wonder if this news is really good. What kind of God would allow the world to perish unless they believe that Jesus is his Son? Is God letting in to heaven only an exclusive group?

Others may ask: Does God really love the world? If so, why is there so much suffering and killing and injustice? What kind of God would allow that?

The whole purpose of this season of Lent as we look at God's great work in sending his son, that this verse will take on a fresh, new life for us. That we will be born again - from above.

### **So let's look what Jesus teacher: God loves the world.**

God created the world and called it good. He created men and women and called the world VERY GOOD. He gave us a noble calling, entrusted us with responsibility for creation. He gave us himself - his intimate, loving presence. He breathed life into us. He made us perfectly in his image.

Last week, Mark described the tragedy of the fall - how humans represented in Adam and Eve turned from God to worship and serve the creature. The Bible calls this idolatry; the worship of anything less than God. Mark gave you a long list of possible idols. So if you weren't sure you had an idol, I'm confident you were able to find one to suit you!

All idols have one thing in common. They are all created. They don't give life. They enslave us. They destroy us. They poison us and in turn we poison our relationships and society.

Here is how N.T. Wright puts it in his new book about the crucifixion: "Worship the wrong divinity, and instead of reflecting God's wise order into the world you will reflect and then produce a distortion: something out of joint, something "unjust." The world is under judgment, because it has become unjust.

This unjust world makes God out to be a liar. It causes us to doubt his goodness, his power, and his love. In doing so it further separates us from his goodness, power and love. It becomes a hopeless spiral cutting us off from the source of life. We perish.

Every week I go to the supermarket and I have these great ambitions of cooking lots of healthy vegetables and juicing. So I buy perishables - and I put them in my refrigerator - and they perish! They wither up, because, as you know, vegetables and plants die once they are picked. The world is like that -when it is cut off from the source.

**Yet, God loves the world.** It is true! He is committed to this world and will not let it

perish. Somehow he is going to miraculously re-connect those perishing cabbages and broccoli stalks and apples to a real, living plant that is drawing nutrients from the source. He is going to make it alive and fruitful again!

**And so, God sent His Son.** What is so special about His Son? As Jesus told Nicodemus: **No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.** No one can connect God and creation, except the God who became creation, who joined with his creation. Jesus, fully man and fully God, in his body joins a poisoned world with a holy God. Jesus says:

**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.**

Jesus refers back to Israel's history. They were saved out of Egypt by miraculous signs: the sending of plagues upon Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the Passover - and yet all those miraculous signs were not enough to make a rebellious people come alive again. Over and over, Israel rejected God's salvation, balked at the brink of the promised land, grumbled about God's provision in the wilderness - his manna from heaven, his miraculous water. They refused his LIFE! Finally, as punishment, God sends a swarm of poisonous snakes.

When I was in Zambia last year, I visited a snake house and saw a black mamba - the most toxic snake on the earth and the most aggressive. Its deadly venom gave it almost mythical qualities; our guard spoke of it with awe. We shuddered in revulsion when its tongue darted out. You can imagine the fear in the hearts of the Israelites as they turn to Moses in repentance and beg him to pray for them that they may be saved.

Moses prays and God instructs Moses to make an image of a snake and place it on a pole. God tells them: look at this image and you will live.

Jesus says he is that snake. He will be raised up on a stake - on the cross - and those who set their eyes on him will live. They will see their own poison carried in his human body. They will see his divinity judging and condemning sin forever in his body - as he bears their poison, their punishment, their death.

And what's more, they will see Jesus is lifted up even higher than the cross- to the very throne of heaven at the right hand of the Father. And on the day of Pentecost he will pour out His Spirit. the life of heaven, on his disciples for the life of the world.

This week archaeologists uncovered in Cairo an ancient statue which they believe to be of the Egyptian King, Ramses II. He was one of the most powerful and influential kings in Egyptian history. The Egyptians worshiped him as a God. They preserved his body so it would last forever. It was a common saying in the ancient world: May the King reign forever! Ramses' lifeless mummy is in the Cairo museum. Jesus raises us out of the dust of the Kingdom of the dead and into the kingdom of the living.

In this way, God loves the world: He sent His Son. In this way also, God loves you: He sent his Son, not so you can go to heaven when you die, but so that heaven can come to you now. His Son is God's gracious gift to you. He is the antidote to your poison - blotting out the toxic effects of sin, guilt, shame and death. He is your meeting place with God, restoring you to intimate, loving communion. He is the reinstatement of your noble calling. That is how God loves the world. That how he loves you. May we receive him by faith and lift him high.