

Sermon

4th Sunday in Lent Year B

3.10.24

Good morning, St. Dunstan family!

Good morning Online family!

It is good to be back in Texas. Alaska is beautiful no doubt. My new grandson is beautiful too. But there's just something to being back home, being here in Texas.

Anyone remember Trivial Pursuit?

Trivial Pursuit is a board game in which winning is determined by a player's ability to answer trivia and popular culture questions.

As of 2014, (10 years ago) more than 100 million games had been sold in 26 countries and 17 languages.

So, here is a question worthy for Trivial Pursuit specifically for those who love church history:

What is another name for today, the Fourth Sunday in Lent?

There are several answers that could work here as with most Episcopal questions.

1. The fourth Sunday in Lent is known in some areas as **Refreshment Sunday**. It was a time of refreshment and relaxing during the more penitential discipline of Lent.

Our lectionary has a table of readings from Scripture appointed to be read during our public worship known as The Revised Common Lectionary. And we use a three-year cycle.

2. In England the 4th Sunday of Lent is called **Mothering Sunday**. Before we adopted the Revised Common Lectionary, the traditional epistle for the fourth Sunday in Lent found in Galatians, states that the heavenly Jerusalem "is the mother of us all" (Gal 4:26) thus some

scholars speculate this was the reason it is called. **“Mothering Sunday”** is a popular name in England for the fourth Sunday in Lent. In other places it was customary to visit one's mother on “Mothering Sunday.” The equivalent of Mother’s Day in North America. No one quite knows for sure why mothers have come to be honored in the middle of Lent. But some scholars speculate that the original Scripture lessons, or readings, on this day made reference to Mary, the Mother of God and the mother of the Church. In any event, if you have British friends, be sure to wish them well today.

It's answer to number 3 I want to focus on.

3. The Fourth Sunday of Lent is traditionally called Laetare Sunday.

Laetare is a Latin word that means “rejoice.”

Th “Rejoice (Laetare) Jerusalem” (Is 66:10). This joyful theme offers some time to lighten up from all of the penitential emphasis of Lent. (we still don’t say the A-word so don’t get crazy!)

And since the thirteenth century the celebrant of the eucharist has been permitted to wear rose-colored vestments which express the change of tone in the Lenten observance.

Side note: Laetare Sunday therefore may be called **“Rose Sunday.”** This custom is not required in the Episcopal Church, but it is observed by some parishes with a traditional Anglo-catholic piety.

There you have some history for the next time you have that question!

Today's Gospel describes the reason for our joy: **God's great love for us has been revealed in Jesus.** Through his passion also known as His suffering, His Death, and His glorious resurrection, Jesus has reunited us with God **and** with each other.

Just as today we are at a halfway point in Lent,

Life is made up of all kinds of **halfway points and transitions.**

You may remember being halfway through the school year, the spring semester, when the trees start to bud and you see green stalks rising up out of the brown earth and yellow dusting all over your cars, your windows, your porches, everywhere.

Recalling last autumn seems like a distant past.

What about being halfway through a project at work feeling that momentum going and a deep sigh of knowing it will get finished? Halfway through tax season?

Halfway through _____. You fill in the blank.

Today our Gospel reading places us into the halfway point of a very important and perhaps some may call a confusing conversation.

Jesus is speaking with a man named Nicodemus.

Back a few verses at John 3:1, we are introduced to him.

*¹There was a man from the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Him at night and said, "Rabbi, **we** know that You have come from God as a teacher, for no one could perform these signs You do unless God were with him."*

What do we know about Nicodemus?

Interesting to note, Nicodemus is **only** mentioned in John's Gospel and does not appear elsewhere in the New Testament.

Speculation holds that he was an extremely powerful man & undoubtedly wealthy. He was a member of the prestigious Sanhedrin, the council of leaders. Our closest parallel would be the Supreme Court.

Nicodemus was also a Pharisee.

In the 1st century, the Scribes and Pharisees were the "good guys." They were the teachers and leaders of Israel, and highly esteemed by most Jewish people.

The Pharisees were widely regarded as meticulous interpreters of the Torah, God's written law.

They observed the ‘extrabiblical traditions’ many of which called upon Jews to be extremely rigorous about eating, tithing, and ritual purity.

They translated rigorousness for holiness. Thus, they also required this lifestyle for the common person.

(Our view of the Pharisees has been skewed due to the fact that most of the Pharisees we meet in the Gospels are part of a relatively small group who constantly badgered Jesus.)

Nicodemus gives us this rather unique insight into the Pharisees. He allows us to see what most of their number were probably like: earnest, seeking men who loved God and the Torah **passionately**, fervently.

We learn that Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night.

Why?

For years I was taught that perhaps he didn’t want to be seen with Jesus in the open and so is trying to slip in to see him under the cover of darkness.

Or some commentators note that coming at night could be a way that Nicodemus **honors** Jesus.

Coming on his own time, after a full day’s work, demonstrates that Nicodemus is motivated by a genuine desire to learn from Jesus.

If we understand their encounter this way, then the Nicodemus we meet in today’s text is less an oppositional teacher preparing to argue with a colleague but more like an eager student visiting a teacher during office hours in order to clarify and gain some better understanding.

Nicodemus is truly a scholar of the Hebrew scripture. This conversation with Jesus gets him pondering, digging deeper, contemplating new thoughts, things he thought he understood but didn’t.

He knew forwards and backwards Jesus reference to our Old Testament reading.

What Nicodemus soon learned that it was for **love** that God gave his Son. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, whoever believes in the Son will not perish but will live forever. The bite of

the serpent will lose its power as we look to Jesus “lifted up” on the cross. God did not send Jesus to condemn but to save humanity, save us from our own self-centeredness.

Sure, Jesus’ response may sound confusing to Nicodemus – and to us.

But maybe that’s the point.

Perhaps Jesus is doing what a lot of good teachers do—instead of providing a simple explanation or answer,

Jesus challenges his extremely perceptive, intelligent student to think more... for himself.

Jesus is attempting to reframe Nicodemus’ understanding of his relationship with God, and that’s not something that he can explain to him in simple terms.

Jesus needs Nicodemus to be able to make sense of it for himself. And Jesus needs that from you too.

We don’t always see God’s presence clearly in the world around us. But as we begin to pay closer attention, every once in a while, we will notice God’s presence especially within us by the transformation of our hearts-maybe we become more other-centered and less judgmental.

Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to start paying attention to the **presence of God** in his life.

Jesus hints at this reality in the first verse of the portion of the Gospel reading,

“Just 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.”

As 21st-century Christians, we hear Jesus’ words in full knowledge of his death and resurrection. It’s a bit easier for us to draw a parallel between the serpent being lifted up in the wilderness (from reading in Numbers) and Jesus being lifted up on the cross.

Nicodemus, on the other hand, doesn’t know yet what’s going to happen to Jesus. Later on, when he does find out, no doubt he will recall this very conversation in the cool of the evening with Jesus, he will learn for the first time the answer to his question:

From John 3:9, Nicodemus asked, “How can somebody be born from above?”

We have the answer to that confusing question. Because Jesus died and rose again.

Jesus himself **is** the answer to Nicodemus’ important question. That’s exactly what Jesus is trying to teach him and for that matter also teach us. But Nicodemus will not—and cannot—completely understand this until he develops a relationship with Jesus. The same thing goes for us. Like Nicodemus, we slowly can nurture a relationship with the Incarnate God.

Developing a relationship with Jesus doesn’t happen overnight. There is no easy, simple ‘how-to guide’ for this very personal process, no matter what anyone says. It requires taking time to pay attention to Jesus, the Risen Christ, and his presence in our lives through His spirit, the Holy Spirit. It requires a continued conversation. I invite you to have a conversation with this same Jesus. Learn about Jesus and learn more of His encompassing love for you.