

In This Way God Loved the World
Numbers 21: 4-9 and John 3: 14-21
March 14, 2021...4th Sunday of Lent
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

I suspect many of us do not have to imagine this scene because we have lived it. You are tired. It is bedtime for your little ones. You have read the book, but you have to go back and read the pages that you skipped because your child notices the pictures they did not see. We have done the last sip of water, the last potty break, the light is on, the comfort toys are under the covers, and yet, those little tired eyes keep finding ways to delay the inevitable. But you know that sleep is the best thing for your child and so no more budging. And then, out of frustration or exhaustion, the little one cries out, "I do not want to go to bed. I hate you!"

I think I know how many of us would want to react, but what if we took a deep breath and instead replied, "I'm sorry you feel that way, but I still love you!" That should just melt that little one's heart. But what happens when the comeback is this: Stop saying that! You breathe in another deep breath and say, "Like it or not, I love you, and that will never change!" No more negotiating...on bedtime or on love. This parent refused to make love conditional. It is a love that we can accept or reject.

That is exactly the way God so loved the world. In Greek, the word *houtos* is translated as "so." Correctly so, but through the ages, that has been understood by some as a matter of degree. You know that gesture when you wrap your arms so far back that you cannot see where the hands meet, and you say to someone, "I love you this much!" There is nothing wrong with that, but the gospel writer did not intend it to be a simple, "God loved the world a whole lot." This goes deeper than how much God loves. It is about how God chose to show that unconditional love. God, though divine was willing to become human like us. Into our world, God sent his only son to show us how to be who we were created to be. Humans were not ready or willing to be loved in this way.

So, Jesus took on the sinful ways we put our human spin on love and offered us another chance. Through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord, we are saved. We can accept or deny that salvation. And still God, like or not, says I love you and that will not change. And on that promise, we can lay down our weary heads and find rest, even the dark hours of our lives! There is no more reason to bargain or negotiate.

It is important to note that prior to our reading, Nicodemus has come to Jesus, in the dark of night, with a restlessness, a yearning, a seeking. What do I need to do to be right with God? How can I have a more meaningful, purposeful life? If we are honest, who among us, at some time, has not been flat on our backs, staring at the ceiling in the middle of the night wanting the reassurance that we are right with God? Wanting to know how to live a more meaningful and purposeful life because of God's love for us?

Nicodemus has not yet heard Jesus' words in verse 16. But the preaching and teaching of Jesus about unconditional, eternal life has stirred his heart. That voice inside is telling him that there is more to God's love than he, a learned and respected religious leader, a Pharisee, needs to know.

Despite his education and status among his fellow Pharisees, he does not think he has an instant “in” with God.

He comes to Jesus at night perhaps because he does not want the other Pharisees to criticize him. Perhaps evening was the only free time he had for personal wonderings. Maybe the writer of John is reminding us of the symbolism of light as good and dark as evil. Whatever the reason, Nicodemus acknowledges that if anyone can help him find a way to settle his restlessness and longing, Jesus can. Whether Nicodemus understands it or not, Jesus knows it a deeper relationship this leader needs with God, not simply more facts about God. Nicodemus needs a new relationship, a change of heart, to understand that God’s love is not about bargaining chips, manipulative ways, or even more facts.

Salvation is a turning one’s heart back to God with your whole being born anew or born from above because it is only by God’s power, not human rites, rituals, or laws, that can change us into the very good people God intends us to be. Either one of these phrases, born anew or born from above, most closely fit the original Greek understanding of born again. Jesus tells Nicodemus that this birth into salvation and eternal life is not like his first birth. Salvation is not just a way back to God after life on earth; it is about also how to live with grateful hearts in all our earthly moments.

I think out of respect for the religious leader that Nicodemus was, Jesus acknowledged that humans cannot make full sense of this, but instead must have full faith. Embracing this faith, with the help of the Spirit, will lead Nicodemus, and us, to better rest.

Author Marcus Borg wrote that belief is not an intellectual learning of facts about God, it is belief as trust and faithfulness that grows as our relationship with God deepens. He also reminds the reader that believing is about a giving of the heart and without fully giving our hearts to God, we miss much of the joy of salvation.

Cue the grumbling, gripping Israelites, saved from captivity, and now growing ungrateful in their freedom. They do not like the food. They do not have enough water. Like it or not, God responds to this complaining by sending poisonous serpents among the people. As one commentator said: It’s kind of like treating a broken arm by smashing the patient’s toe with a hammer. Your arm may not feel better, but you are too busy screaming about your toe to complain about the arm.

This story of Moses lifting up the bronze serpent to save those who were snagged by the snake, leads John into the truth that God will lift up Jesus so that all who believe him to be their Lord will be given new life, an eternal one that begins in this life. That is a reason for blessed rest every day.

Choosing to believe in a new life is the difference maker for eternal life and choosing has always been part of God’s plan of love, deliverance, and salvation. John’s message says to us, that even if we, on our own choose darkness, through salvation in Jesus, we still have the choice to turn and follow him out of the world’s darkness and into the Lord’s light.

It is the light of the Lord that helps us put aside that restlessness, that seeking, that yearning that comes when the world's darkness hovers over us. Belief in Jesus as Lord heals life's deepest dark, a broken relationship with our Creator. To return to the life God intends for us, we must be willing to accept that God's love comes to us in this way: through the death of God's only son, Jesus. To embrace the joy of our salvation, we must be willing to live as Jesus lived on earth and celebrate that beyond this world life eternal is ours.

I want to leave us with this food for our souls. There once was a man who did not believe in the virgin birth of Jesus, nor the spiritual meaning behind it. As a matter of fact, he was a little skeptical about God. His wife and children, however, found hope in their belief that Jesus was their Lord. The husband was often heard saying, "It's all nonsense. Why would God lower himself and become a human like us? It's such a ridiculous story!"

The family lived on a farm, and one Sunday after the wife and children had left for church, a blinding snowstorm swept in, so the man decided to stoke up the fire and enjoy a relaxing evening. Suddenly there was a loud thump as something hit the window. He decided to go outside and check, and when he did, he saw the strangest sight. A field-full of geese were apparently flying toward warmer weather but had been caught in the violent wind and blinding snow.

Stranded, with no food or water and able only to flutter their wings and fly in circles, the man decided to open up the barn doors, a place where the geese could find warmth and shelter. He had hoped they would notice and fly in on their own, but when they did not, he moved closer in hopes of guiding them to safety. But the closer he came, the further they moved away.

So, he tried leaving a trail of bread, some nourishment, from the field to the barn. No response. Growing a bit frustrated, he tried shooing them into the barn, but all that did was cause panic and cause them to scatter even more. Then came the questions, "Why don't they follow me? Can't they see this is the only place where they can survive the storm? How can I possibly get them into the one place that will save them?"

Like the light bulb coming on, he realized that these birds would not follow him, a human. He could only save them if he became like them. As he was poised to slowly flap his arms and move toward the barn, he stopped in his tracks and he heard with his heart what his lips just said. If only I could become like one of them, I could save them.

In that instant, he understood God's heart toward humankind, who became like us in order that we might be saved. **In this way, God loved the world.**

May embracing God's invitation and promise of salvation, provide rest in the Lord, as our Savior, when the sun rises, when it sets and for all the moments of eternal living in between. Amen