

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Second Sunday in Lent - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

03/08/2020

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

1Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." 3Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do 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." 9Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11"Very truly, I

tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16“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. 17“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.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A Saving God

Good morning! If you go out for dinner with the Crummitt family, Mike Crummitt pays. For a number of years, when my grandfather was still alive, it was battle to see who could get the check. Even after he died, Grandma Crummitt put up a good fight for the check too. It's just the way of the world, the sun rises and sets, the seasons change, and a Crummitt will fight for the check. It's a trait my siblings and I all share too; Megan just steps back and watches with a smile as we argue. I remember once watching Grandma and Dad with the check in each of their hands pulling so hard I thought for sure the check would rip in half.

So you can imagine the helplessness I feel when someone else gets the check. It's a strange feeling, like it's equal parts both helplessness and gratitude. On the one hand I feel helpless to stop it from happening. Maybe I've already fought for the check, or the person paid for it when I wasn't looking (a classic Crummitt trick, by the way.) On the other hand, I am deeply thankful for the gift that this person has given me. Because I know what it feels like to do this for someone else, and because one of my love languages is gift giving, I can't help but be thankful when it happens to me. It's also something I have been forced to become more comfortable with in my time as a pastor. For many people, grabbing the bill when we're out for a meal together, or leaving a gift on my office desk is about showing the gratitude and love that is in the person's own heart. I could fight for the bill, or refuse the gift, but it cheapens the experience.

You would think that this feeling of vulnerability would be something we human beings have grown accustomed to. We start out as some of the most vulnerable creatures on the planet. But yet, here we are, reading a text that confronts us with the reality of our vulnerability. It's this helplessness that Lutherans confess every time we remind one another that our salvation has nothing to do with our own actions, and is solely in the hand of our Lord. But that's not the case. We've taken these verses about God and turned them into something about us.

We read today that: *“14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16“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. 17“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.*¹ Verse 16 is probably the most famous piece of scripture in the whole of the Bible. As such, it can come with a lot of baggage for some people. Anna Carter Florence summarizes this well when she writes: *“Let us face it: this passage has been used in some pretty awful ways to sort us into groups. ‘Are you born again?’ is code language for, ‘Are you saved, like us?’ Or ‘Are you crazy, like them?’ In its insider mode, it functions as a way to determine a person’s salvation as a believer in Jesus Christ. In its outsider mode, it serves as a convenient way to label religious fanatics. Neither version of the question is especially accurate or helpful, because both rely on stereotypes of what it means to be a card-carrying Christian.”*²

I’ll confess, I’m guilty of that second one. When I hear that question I roll my eyes. But that isn’t helpful, because it continues to make the text about two human theologies that are seen as in competition. What all of this fails to do is grasp the significance of what GOD is up to in this story! God is doing what God does best, saving us humans! As the song goes, our God is “mighty to save.” Which brings us to our questions. We have often used John 3:16 as a way to categorize others, as a way to define who gets in or who is kept out. Rev. Rick Carter, my supervisor on internship, argued that we can’t have John 3:16 without verse 17. It’s not about condemnation, but about God’s desire for us all to be saved! So, for the next few minutes, with a partner or two, let’s talk about that. If you would like, write down your answers and put them in the offering plate.

¹ John 3:14-17 NRSV

² Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year A, Volume II.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 71.

Congregation talks for five minutes.

OK! I hope you found that interesting. I'm really curious to hear what you discussed. I want to finish with a quote that I hope you find interesting. It's from a scholar named Rudolf Bultmann, who says: *"The event which is brought to fulfillment in the exaltation of the Son of Man is grounded in the love of God which sent him, so that faith might receive eternal life. The real miracle, therefore, is the mission of the Son, which men believe when they believe in the exaltation of the Son of Man. Belief in his mission is belief in his exaltation. For only the man who overcomes the offenses of Jesus' humility and who perceives his exaltation in his death, can see in Jesus the Son sent by the Father. The reverse is also true, that faith in the exalted Lord (v. 15) involves the affirmation of his humiliation (v. 16)."*³ (read quote again, replacing exaltation with "lifted up.")

What I find so interesting about what Bultmann says is that this salvation, this exaltation that we're so caught up in, can only be understood in light of the suffering of the cross. God saves the most rag-tag group of creatures to walk the face of the earth, and God does that saving in the most peculiar and uncommon of ways. Why? What could that possible mean? Well, that's a question we're on our way to find out. Amen.

³ Bultmann, Rudolf. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Philadelphia, Pa: Westminster Press, 1971. pp. 153-154.