

February 17, 2008 – Lent 2
Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park
Rev. Elizabeth Musselman

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

Hymn: “God Loved the World” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #323)

Grace to you and peace from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We’ve just heard John 3:16, perhaps the most famous verse of the entire Bible—a verse which gives comfort to those who mourn, and the single verse that Martin Luther considered to be the best, most clear encapsulation of the entire gospel. God sent the son into the world in order that it might be saved through him. John 3:16 is rich in theological brilliance: it’s the stuff of good, comforting sermons. A love between God and humans that’s so deep and so enduring, a gift that brings into our perishable, sinful human existence new life. John 3:16 tells us about an eternal life that means more than simply living forever: God’s gift to us is an utterly redeemed existence that’s radically transformed in quality as well as quantity. God sent the son into the world in order that it might be saved through him.

But as beautiful and theologically rich as John 3:16 is, I’d like to suggest that John 3:16 *isn’t* the most important part of today’s story about Nicodemus—at least not the most important part for us to hear this morning. I think what may be most important for us to hear about this morning is the way Jesus *deconstructs* Nicodemus, tearing apart his most deeply held convictions about what it means to believe—and the fact that

Nicodemus allows himself to be *shaken up* by his encounter with Jesus, ending with nothing but complete puzzlement. Because the experience of being *shaken up* is something that happens to all of us—when we encounter our mortality, when we encounter people or ideas who are different, when we encounter our own weaknesses. As theologically rich as John 3:16 is, and as much as it promises us hope—the fact remains that it’s embedded in a story about *the collapse of certainty*, and this is our first point of contact with Nicodemus.

Certainty collapses into uncertainty: It’s something that many of us probably experienced just a few days ago—as we heard about the campus shootings at Northern Illinois University and grieved with the families of the students who were killed. It’s something that happens to us whenever we’re faced with death, or with the knowledge that suffering is a very real part of life. It’s something that confronts us when we realize that learning is not always going to be comfortable, or when we find God speaking to us through failure as well as success.

Certainty collapses when Jesus challenges Nicodemus—an established religious leader who’s the first-century equivalent of a seminary professor or a divinity school professor; an expert in sacred Scripture and its history of interpretation. Nicodemus is a teacher who has enough theological confidence to begin his dialogue with Jesus by saying *Rabbi, we know! We KNOW who you are! And we know WHY we know it!* This is the kind of confidence that makes good teachers and good students, but Jesus says to him: *No. You really don’t know. What you think you know is wrong. And you’re not*

even asking the right questions. And Nicodemus, this powerful religious leader, is *shaken up*. And the final time we hear him speak, he is simply incredulous: *How can these things be?*

The collapse of certainty—this movement from “*we know*” to “*how can this be?*”—is something we share with Nicodemus. Certainty crumbles into the discomfort of uncertainty when we’re shaken up by death, whether it’s the loss of people we deeply love or the tragic deaths of strangers that we see on the news. Confidence dissolves into “*how can this be?*” when we’re confronted in the classroom or at work with an opinion that’s so different from our own that it makes us uncomfortable. Certainty collapses into incredulous doubt when someone points out our weaknesses, or when we realize that we, like Nicodemus, may have been asking the wrong questions all along, and we have no idea how to get it right.

How can this be? Nicodemus is at a complete loss. Rebirth through water and the Spirit were so far outside his worldview. But this is precisely where the story gets interesting—because even when Nicodemus fails to believe the right things or to ask the right questions, Jesus *keeps talking* to him. The good news in this story is that Jesus doesn’t stop the conversation or move on to someone more worthy, someone smarter or more willing instantly to convert. Jesus chastises Nicodemus for not understanding, but in the very same breath he interprets the Scriptures for Nicodemus! *Remember that story from the Torah, where the people of God lost their faith and they were punished by poisonous snakes and began to die, until Moses raised up a snake on a stick and all who*

looked at it were healed? So too with the Son of Man, who will be lifted up so that all who look to him are saved.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, *you need to believe to be saved*, and at the same time he gives Nicodemus exactly what he needs to believe! He places before Nicodemus' unbelieving eyes the very image of Christ that brings salvation. For God sent the Son into the world in order that the world might be saved through him. That's *it*: that's the snake on a pole that brings healing!

It may seem strange to compare Jesus to a snake, but this is precisely how Jesus interprets the Scriptures. *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. Like the serpent in the wilderness who saved the people of God from the poison of their unfaithfulness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.* The Greek word that we translate as *lifted up* [*hypsōthenai*] means to be *exalted* or *glorified*—but it also means *crucified*. Remember that on Ash Wednesday we learned that the Hebrew word for *glory* also means weight or heaviness. And now, in today's story, we're reminded again that our God of glory is one who immerses himself into the heaviness of human life and suffering, one for whom exaltation means suffering, one who is lifted up into death on a cross to save us from the poison of our sin.

This is a hard lesson to hear, if we *really* hear it: not through the cliché summaries of Christian salvation that are often inspired by John 3:16, or through programmatic methods for being born again, but really by staring at Christ on the cross. Because when

we look at the cross, we're confronted with the fact that glory also means rejection, and we're faced with the possibility that we might be called to suffer for the sake of someone else, and we're unsettled by the knowledge that if you follow Christianity through to the end, you might be asked to *give up your life* for others. *How can this be?* It challenges our deepest presumptions and threatens our desire for comfort. It's common for Christians to grasp the comfort of eternal life when we're faced with our mortality, but the cross of Christ tells us something about *this* life too, and it's something very uncomfortable. Exaltation means rejection. Glory means suffering. *How can this be?*

No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, Jesus says to Nicodemus. We must die to the old before we can be born to the new. Nicodemus is puzzled. And we don't ever get to find out what happens to Nicodemus as this conversation with Jesus continues, because the last we hear of him he is still asking the question "*how can this be?*" We don't know how Nicodemus responds when he hears the comforting words that we now know as John 3:16. We don't know whether he stays and talks with Jesus until morning, or whether he sneaks back into the night, stuck in the shaky discomfort of uncertainty. We don't know when Nicodemus finally begins to realize he's asking the wrong questions. We don't know when he begins to understand what it means to be born from above with water and the Spirit, or when he understands that he *has already* gazed at the one who heals all who gaze upon him.

All we know is that later in John's gospel Nicodemus will reappear two more times—first when he gently suggests that Jesus deserves a fair trial before being

prosecuted by the Pharisees—and then again at the very end, when Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea gently take down the body of Jesus, and wrap it in linens, and anoint it with myrr and aloe, and carry it to the tomb.

Nicodemus doesn't get to have the benefit of 2000 years of hindsight or an established church where baptism is the norm. He doesn't yet know that at the end of every story is Resurrection, or that God has promised always to be present in the bread and the wine. And yet, *still*, at the end of his encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus has gazed at the cross—and all he can do in the end is immerse himself in Jesus' suffering.

And this is what the cross calls us to do too: in the midst of uncertainty and grief, to cover Jesus' broken, dead body with spices and linens; to grieve with and for those who suffer; to refuse to flee from pain into false comforts. We're called to let the cross confront us, because in that discomfort lies our salvation. Amen.