



Hear the Word

from Pastor Mary-Alyce Burleigh

Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send...

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 11, 2018

John 3:14-21

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our creator and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

“And 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.” So ... how many of you recognized that our Gospel reading today comes at the end of the story of Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to Jesus in the night, in spiritual darkness, searching for the spiritual light to guide his life? Never fear, I will come back to this later.

Today's Gospel reading is paired with the earlier reading from the Hebrew Scriptures from Numbers and the story of the bronze serpent.

As was the way with the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness they often became impatient. They began to grumble, complain and argue among themselves. Instead of being a community together, they became more and more divided, blaming God, Moses and even I suggest each other for the state of their lives. Our text from Numbers reads, **“The people spoke against God and against Moses.**

Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

God's response was to **“send poisonous serpents (snakes) among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.”** God's response to Moses's plea to take away the serpents was to instruct Moses to make a bronze model of a poisonous snake and put it on a pole so that whenever a person was bitten, if they looked on it, they would not die. (Why the serpent is the symbol of medicine).

The imagery states the problem and the solution: Problem= poisonous snakes on the ground who brought death. Solution = look on the snake on the pole and live.

This brings us to our Gospel reading for this morning, this 4th Sunday in Lent.

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Problem: human beings who bring death upon themselves. Solution: Son of man on a pole (cross) who brings life.

Whoever looked in faith at the snake lived. Whoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life.

John 3:15 is the first time "Eternal life" is used in the gospel. It is then used always used with the present tense verb - usually "have." Thus it is something believers have now and lasts forever. John 3:16, arguably the most well known verse in the New Testament, and don't we all know it? Reads, **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life."**

Eternal life is one of the dominant metaphors in the Gospel of John.

It is something believers have now, and perhaps should be translated "unending life." It begins now and lasts forever. I think we often consider it to begin after we die but John describes it as the change in human existence that comes about by faith in Jesus. Or if you will, the faith of Jesus.

To have eternal life is to live life no longer defined by blood or by the will of the flesh or by human will but by God. It is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God. To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God.

This shifts our expectation to the present as well as in the hereafter.

It is time defined not as chronological or chronos but as what is called *ounius* time - life as it should be; quality of life of grace and goodness here now.

It is something not held in abeyance until the believer's future, but begins in the believer's present. "For God so loved the world," is another phrase in our gospel today. The words love and hate nearly always are assigned to the internal states in our society. I sometimes wonder which word we use the most - love or hate?

The key word is love.

As used here it is best translated as "group attachment" or "attachment to some person." It is the inward feeling of attachment (affection) along with the outward behavior bound up with such attachment that love entails.

I suggest that in this understanding, God's love means attaching God to the world.

God sent his Son. The Word become flesh. Love is not necessarily just an inward emotion, but also involves outward actions - a theme that reoccurs throughout the Gospel of John.

Correspondingly, hate would mean "disattachment" or non attachment or indifference.

When reading these passages, I thought about how we in our nation, here today, are in some ways like the Israelites in the desert - As you remember, they were a people who were often divided, unhappy with their lot in life and only too eager to blame someone other than themselves for their predicament. They turned on each other, argued; were a divided community. It took them 40 years of wandering, the gift of the 10 commandments, to develop their identity as a community.

What saddens me most is that we like the Israelites seem to have lost the ability to engage in what we used to call "Civil Discourse."

A time when politics was more often based on the art of compromise not dissension, and my way or the highway thinking. We have so many examples; students shot down in their schools, threat of terrorism, the fear of the other, building walls not bridges.

"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you" Jesus said to his disciples in that last few days of his life. One look around us and we wonder: really? Peace? Where is it? It is appropriate I think that the season of Lent that is now upon us, has long been a time of reflection and introspection in the life of the church.

A time to examine ourselves - our hearts, our minds, our priorities. A time to repent - to turn and

go in a different direction. A starting point is that we build peace in the world by beginning with ourselves.

I suggest we are challenged in today's contentious world, to focus on how to maintain civil discourse in challenging conversations. I call it Peace Focused Communication - a way to transform our effectiveness in dealing with conflicts as individuals and groups.

It is a way to focus on the here and now; it takes power away from outside concerns and negative thoughts; it helps us remain stable and grounded.

The steps seem so simple but in practice are challenging. There are six steps. I think you know what they are - but perhaps during this season of reflection, it is good to revisit them.

1. Pause and center - hard for us in our profoundly un-still world. Peace or Shalom in the Bible is much more than the absence of conflict. Shalom means wholeness and completeness within ourselves. Building our ability to remain peaceful in the midst of conflict allows us to participate in hard conversations while still acknowledging the humanity of the person with whom we disagree.

I am reminded of my time as a politician when one of the challenges was to remember that it was crucial to separate the person from the issue - if for no other reason that today's adversary may well be tomorrow's ally.

It meant taking time to sit with them, share a cup of coffee and sit and pause.

It means beginning and or ending our day in a time of quiet reflection. Remembering we are all beloved children of God.

2. Listen actively First - This is really hard. It means seeking to understand the other person as fully as you can before you respond.

It means resisting the temptation to be formulating your response while the other is still talking. It means sitting in silence and really listening, rather than filling your head with words to attack or counter what the other has just said.

3. Inquire: When people asked Jesus a question, he nearly always did one of two things: he asked a question back or he told a story. How do we inquire into another person's thinking, rather than assume we know what they mean?

This is where inquiry comes in: Why do you think that? Can you tell me how you reached that conclusion? To do so can help us find our shared humanity.

4. Speak: Speak your own truth with kindness.

John 3 is a conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. They ask questions. Nicodemus admits he still cannot understand - a significant act of courage by Nicodemus. Speaking our own truth is also an act of courage. It makes us vulnerable as we might be misunderstood. It requires us to think carefully about what we really believe and why? We might be asked questions.

It is using language like "I feel," "my perspective is". Resist statements like "everyone knows" or "we all agree" or perhaps "only an idiot would think that."

5. Keep it open: Avoid the barriers to keeping our communication with each other open and thoughtful. Be easygoing. Leave room for silence.

Avoid falling into judgment, blaming, demanding, threatening and labels. As appropriate, use humor.

6. Tone of Voice, Body language - picture the voice and expression of someone who likes and respects you deeply. Emulate that and convey openness, trust, care rather than skepticism, anxiety or contempt. Think about an experience where body language, tone of voice encouraged peaceful conversation. What did that look and feel like?

For God so loved the world, the cosmos, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Thus the goal that this faith envisages - is the salvation of the world - to make the world whole, to fulfill its promise, to 'mend' its torn and tattered life.

"God so loved the world" is about us - you and me. It's about us in relationship to the world that is loved. How will we as children of this God, relate to the world - its people, its resources.

Will we will be those who do what is true to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that our deeds have been done in God who so loved the world?

One of my favorite hymns is "What kind of Courage' by Mary Kay Beall.

*What kind of courage is required to build a bridge and not a wall
What kind of courage is required to do what's right by duty's call?
What kind of courage is required to stand beside a trembling soul?
To offer comfort, food and aid, to make a threatened family whole?
What kind of courage is required?*

*What kind of words are needed now when 'Welcome' seems to be denied?
What kind of words are needed now when common sense is laid aside?
What kind of words are needed now to give an anxious child a smile,
To calm the rising tide of fear, to help us walk that extra mile?
What kind of words are needed now?*

*What kind of nation will we be if we let hate and fear divide
What kind of nation will we be if we let hate and fear decide
What kind of nation will we be if race and faith drive us apart
If eyes are blind to other's tears, if we have lost love's healing art?
What kind of nation will we be?*

As the final verse of our Hymn of the day Proclaims:

*Many the gifts, many the people,
Many the hearts that yearn to belong
Let us be servants to one another
Signs of your Kingdom come.*

Let it be so, Amen.