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Matthew 4:1-11

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalms 121

Romans 4:1-5,13-17

March 5, 2023

The Second Sunday in Lent

How many of you know the phrase...Nothing good happens after midnight? If you are a parent, you've said it and if you are a teenager, you've heard it. It's the tried and true parenting phrase handed out with every curfew. Because we know that at night, the rules of the day tend to slip away when faced with more appealing temptations. When we want to make sure that no one sees what we are up to.

This is where we find Nicodemus in our Gospel. A leader of the Jews. A man who knows the rules. And yet, here he is sneaking out at night to hang out with Jesus. Under the cover of darkness, Nicodemus is doing something he doesn't want anyone to see. You can imagine him tip toeing down alley ways and ducking behind walls as he makes his way to Jesus' house.

Why do you think that is? Why wouldn't Nicodemus just go and visit Jesus during the day?

I want to suggest that the story of Nicodemus is a story about a dilemma most of us face. That is...how do we live our faith...not just on the inside but on the outside? Do we tip toe around hoping we can just say we are a Christian? Can we just talk the talk? Or, are we willing to live our faith out in the open...even when it isn't easy or comfortable or socially acceptable? Can we walk the walk?

Let's consider verse 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." *Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ.*

So verse 16 asks...Can you believe in Jesus Christ? It's a simple question with profound implications. Our answer to that question is critical if we are to understand how our belief can be part of the next thing that Jesus says in verse 17. He says..."God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." *In order that the world might be saved through him.*

Jesus is talking here about a belief that leads to radical, transformative change. Not just in our hearts (although that is absolutely part of the equation) but it's also about the implications for the entire world through who we are and what we do with our belief.

Take a look at verse 14. Jesus references a story in the book of Numbers from the Hebrew text about Moses. *"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up."*

It's an important reference but it's such a short little phrase that we often miss it. But, as we know about Biblical writing, if it's included in the text, it's probably important to discerning the

greater context of the teaching. In this case it's an important reference to help us understand what Jesus is teaching about belief and how it works in our lives.

The story in Numbers chapter 21 tells of a community of Israelites who had been at war with the Canaanites. They made a vow to God and said if you turn those crazy Canaanites over to us we will destroy their villages and get rid of them for you. And that's what happens. But, as the Israelites are traveling away from the towns they had just destroyed, they become impatient. Here is what the text from Numbers reads:

...the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The 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.'

⁶Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.'

So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.'⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

This is the story Jesus is referencing in the Gospel of John. The lesson of the story is this...God wants the Israelites to remember how they were saved. Then he wants them to reflect on their bitterness and complaining. And every time they fall back into these old, destructive patterns, they are to look upon the bronze serpent and work to do better, to come back to their belief in God and their trust in God.

And God offers the same opportunity of transformation to every single person in that community. No one is left out. And God holds the same expectation for change for every single person. No one is left out. That's the heart of verse 16. God loves this world and all who are in it. And because of that love he gave us Jesus not only for our salvation but for our transformation.

Because the inner and outer life of faith is nothing if not transformative. It's bold and is willing to take risks. It's the kind of faith that radically loves when others choose hate, that boldly stands up for justice when others falter in complicity, that courageously confesses sin when others hide away in guilt or shame or ambivalence. It's the kind of faith that stands on the promises of Christ and works tirelessly to bring those promises out into the light.

I want to leave you with a powerful excerpt from an essay by John van de Laar. Listen to his interpretation of this kind of Gospel transformation. He writes..

“In our churches, it is easy to reduce faith to a system of ideas that we call our people to accept. It is easy to make salvation nothing more than praying the right prayer and signing the right card. But, if we do this, we rob our people of the true power and value of faith. A faith that is simply a set of ideas does not lead us to new birth. It does not change our very lives and give us a new way of seeing or a God’s-reign way of being – which may be why Christians are so often accused of being hypocrites.

However, faith that does not change who we are and how we live, is not faith at all. Ultimately, believing does not happen in our heads alone, but in our whole being, and in lives that, in small but significant ways, touch the least with grace and compassion, and seek to make the world a more hopeful, celebratory and gracious place.

Faith that does not change who we are and how we live, is not faith at all. Amen.