

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent A 05 March 2023  
Genesis 12:1-4 and John 3:1-17  
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth  
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*Nicodemus said to [Jesus], 'How can these things be?' Let's pray: . . .*

Nicodemus has stepped into the dark depths of his life. "How can these things be?" In the darkness, nothing makes sense and he longs to understand. And he's got plenty of mates. On the night of the last supper, Thomas asks: "How can we know the way" (John 14:5)? Mary asked the angel Gabriel about giving birth to the Son of God: "How can this be, since I am a virgin" (Luke 1:34)? Zechariah seeks assurance from an angel of the Lord about the son he and Elizabeth will have: "How will I know that this is so" (Luke 1:18)? And I'm sure Abram must have wondered, "How can I leave my country, my kindred, and my father's house" (Genesis 12:1)?

Aren't these our stories too? "When, Lord? Where, Lord? Why, Lord? How long, Lord?" There are times in each of our lives when understanding gives way to the darkness of fear and uncertainty. It seems that the journey of faith is a journey through the darkness. Maybe, like Nicodemus, we all come "to Jesus by night."

Whether it's through a call from God, a crisis of faith, or things that go pear-shaped in our lives, we all revisit the dark recesses of our lives. They're those:

- times and places in our lives when we feel isolated and alone, when the stability and predictability of life are disrupted, when our confidence shrivels and we have more questions than answers;
- times when we're afraid, when we feel powerless, or when we feel overwhelmed and unprepared for what might happen next;
- times we feel cast adrift, and there's no stability, no anchor, and nothing to hold on to.
- times when we try to figure it all out but nothing makes sense, and we simply just don't know what to do;

- times when we feel like strangers in a foreign land;
- times when we face the unknown;
- times when we don't know and can't see the way forward.

I've been there. We've all been to those dark places and times in our lives and they're scary. I know some of you are in the darkness of life today. What are your darkness of life stories? When have you stepped out into the darkness? What did it feel like?

The darkness of life is a difficult place for all of us. Sometimes we might experience it as an absence, an ending, or some kind of loss or death. At others times, we might experience it as an overwhelming presence of confusion, not knowing, a sense of being lost, a disorienting vertigo. It's a place of struggle and discomfort. We want answers instead of questions, certainty instead of ambiguity, and light instead of shadows. We want understanding and explanations. We want to see the way forward. We want to know where we're going, what will happen, and what lies ahead.

The problem is, Saints, in the darkness of life there are no answers. There are only the promises of God. Do you remember God's promises to Abram? "I will," God says. God acts in the darkness of our lives. If Abram will step into the mystery of the unknown, the darkness of his life, God will do the rest. "I will show you," "I will make of you," "I will bless you," God tells Abram (Genesis 12:1-2).

The darkness of life is no time to try to figure it all out, do more, or make sense of what's happening. It's a time of surrendering to God. It's a time of trusting that there's more hidden in the darkness than we can see. It's a time for accepting that the wind of God blows where it will and changes our lives. It's a time for spiritual renewal.

In the darkness of life, the problem isn't the darkness but our fear and confusion about what the darkness means. What if new life lays on the other side of the darkness? What if the darkness is the border between us and a fuller life? What if the darkness is the means by which God transforms our lives? What if we understood the darkness as a time to yield and let God's will be done. What if we understood and trusted that new life and light are born of the darkness?

That's what it was for Nicodemus, Thomas, Mary, Zechariah, Abram and Sarai. Why would we think it's anything less for us?

A seed planted in the darkness of the earth sprouts, rises, and reaches for the sun's light. A child in the darkness of his or her mother's womb is born into the light of day. Christ burst forth from the darkness of the tomb "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:79). And let's not forget that God's "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3), was spoken in the darkness, and continues to be spoken in the darkness of every time, place, and life.

In the darkness of life, we've got to give our eyes time to adjust to the darkness. It's not so much looking for light around us as it is discovering the light within us, the light of Christ:

- Desmond Tutu once said, "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness."
- Victor Hugo quipped, "Even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise."
- Anne Frank mused, "Look at how a single candle can both defy and define the darkness."

I like the way St John puts it:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:1-5; see also Psalm 23:4).*

This light, Jesus, shines in the darkness of life, creating the shadow in the valley of death. Jesus shone for Nicodemus, Thomas, Mary, Zechariah, Abram and Sarai. And Jesus shines for us as well. In the darkness of life, Jesus says we're not alone even when we don't see another soul around. He shows the way forward when it's so dark we can't see our own hands. He holds in his hands the dawn of a new day after a long night. Jesus is God's "I will" for us.

“How can these things be?” “For God so loved the world [including you and me] that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” So amazing is this verse that Luther calls it “the gospel in miniature.” This also amazes Nicodemus, who understands that God loves Israel, God’s chosen people, but struggles to believe that God loves the world.

The wording of this verse is similar to one of the stories of Abraham, who was commanded by God, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you” (Genesis 22:2). Abraham took the knife, but an angel of God prevented him from sacrificing his son. However, God doesn’t spare himself. God’s giving of his Son begins with the Incarnation, but requires the cross to fulfill his purposes.

God’s response to sin is divine self-sacrifice. It would have been far less costly for God to ignore the world’s sins and to allow people to live in darkness, but that’s not how love works. Take parenting for example. It costs far more in time and energy to supervise a child rather than letting the child run wild.

Some parents prefer not to constrain their child, but what appears to be a gift of freedom instead compromises the child’s welfare. It’s not a “hands-off” approach that demonstrates love, but a willingness to make the necessary sacrifices to keep the child safe. That’s the sacrifice God made in sending Jesus to save the world.

“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” (John 3:17). From Abram and Sarai to all of you wonderful Saints before me, salvation is assured by God’s gracious gift of himself. Yes indeed, by your faith in Jesus Christ, you “are born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5), and will “see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus, the light and life that the darkness will never overcome. Amen.