

Lent 4B 2021 John 3:14-21 & Numbers 21:4-9

It is only a coincidence that today, the beginning of Day Light Savings Time, the lectionary gives us Jesus' words: *the light has come into the world, and the people loved darkness rather than light*. I will be grateful when this evening comes and there is an extra hour of daylight, but all week I was dreading losing that hour of sleep. I am the worst when it comes to adjusting to time changes—Day Light Savings or traveling across time zones. I don't really love the darkness; I always feel low on energy during the shorter days of winter. And I'm not naturally a morning person, so I prefer the extra hour of light at the end of the day instead of the beginning; but I'm not going to appreciate it until my internal clock adjusts. For today, at least until I take a nap, I'm going to be a little bit cranky and complain.

Our gospel passage begins with Jesus' reminder of the Israelites' historic complaint that we read about in Numbers. The trip from Egypt to the Promised Land took much longer than the people had anticipated, and they often complained to Moses, complaints that were really directed at God. *Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food*. This is a fascinating complaint: first of all, the reason Moses brought them out of Egypt was to free them from slavery. They weren't dying in the wilderness; God continued to protect and provide for them. And in the same breath that they say there is no food, they admit that there *is* food, they just don't like it. Evidently the manna God rained down from heaven for which they did not have to work was not good enough for them. I sympathize: sometimes I stand in the kitchen in front of a full refrigerator and complain that there's nothing to eat. I call for someone to deliver a pizza. The Lord delivered snakes.

The snakes make the Israelites realize that their ingratitude is a sin. So they stop complaining and start begging Moses to ask the Lord to take the snakes away. But notice that the Lord doesn't take the snakes away; the Lord commands Moses to make a statue of a snake so when the people get bitten, they look up at the fake snake and live. Similarly, Jesus says, he will be lifted up, so that those who look to him will have eternal life.

The context of today's gospel is Jesus' conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus, who visits Jesus under the nighttime cover of darkness to try to better understand who Jesus is and what he has been teaching. Jesus tries to explain to Nicodemus the concept of being born again from above in the Spirit, but Nicodemus can't make sense of what Jesus is saying. He thinks Jesus is talking about physical birth and physical life. Jesus is talking about spiritual birth and eternal life.

John 3:16 is possibly the most famous verse of scripture, but it may also be the most misused. *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*. And because a wise pastor once told me you should

never recited verse 16 without verse 17, remember that Jesus continues, *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*. Too often these words are used not as a promise of hope, love, grace, and assurance but as a password, a test that people have to pass to distinguish those who get to go to heaven from those who will be excluded and condemned. But it can only be understood that way if you don't know what most of the words mean.

God so loved the world—that is, not a few people, not even just people, but the whole creation. So, because God loved not just the good people, not just the people lucky enough to be born in the right time or place or religion, but the whole *world*, God sent the Son *not* to condemn but to save. When Jesus talks about those who *believe*, he doesn't mean agreeing with the creed or the catechism; our Modern English word *believe* comes from the Old English word for *beloved*. So believers are those who love Jesus so much they remain in relationship with him, trusting that Jesus' life is the fullest revelation we have of the will of God. And the eternal life that those who believe may have—*eternal* doesn't mean life that starts after death; *eternal* means something that has no end and no beginning. So Jesus isn't talking about whether or not we get an afterlife. Jesus is talking about whether this life we're living right now is a life spent in relationship with God or not.

Jesus says that those who don't believe are condemned already because this life, right now, is qualitatively different—less joyful, less hopeful, less graceful—when we don't respond to God's invitation to relationship. It's human nature that we're reluctant to respond, because God calls us to confession and repentance, and instead of living in the light that exposes our sin, we'd rather continue in the darkness that we imagine hides our brokenness. But when we do that, the brokenness is still there. It's through the light that reveals our sin that God forgives our sin.

In the desert, the Israelites wanted the Lord to take away the snakes, but the snakes remained. I don't know how those snakes worked exactly—if they were complaint-seeking snakes who slithered after the whiners and bit them. But we know the people continued to complain, and the snakes continued to bite. So the people looked at the bronze snake to be healed when they were afflicted. Likewise, God doesn't take away all the options we have to sin, therefore we continue to choose evil sometimes. And when we do, we're tempted to avoid the broad daylight where there's nowhere to hide what we've done. But living in relationship with Jesus, the light of the world, means we get to look to the one who was lifted up on the cross by and for us, not just to be healed and forgiven for whatever venomous thing we've done, but also to see a way of living that won't compel us to hide in the shadows. God continues to invite us out of the darkness and into the eternal light of Christ. We're not really living in Daylight Savings Time—we're really living in God's eternal time; adjusting is rough, but living in the light is infinitely worth it.