

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

March 22, 2009

Lent 4B 2009

In the Name of our one ever calling, ever sustaining God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

‘Today’s Gospel lesson is from John, and as Fr Bill has said, whenever we see John pop up in the lectionary we know that we are in for some heavy theology. Contained in our Gospel reading is that famous [passage, John 3:16, that we see on signs being waived at NFL and NBA games: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Unfortunately, biblical literacy is different from biblical literalism. It is important to see this passage in context and to know a bit about the Gospel of John. I think the placard wavers give this passage short shrift despite their ardent fervor. It is much richer than that.

Jesus here is speaking with Nicodemus, a Pharisee who has some faith in Jesus as being a man of God. Here, Jesus is telling him that he, Nicodemus, doesn’t know the half of it. His belief is insufficient because it solely based on his own observations and reasoning. In short, Nicodemus is fully in charge of the situation. Belief in John is always a verb; it is something we actively do, what we live into, what we put our hearts next to. Belief in John is active trust in and hoping in God. Belief is most definitely not an opinion or an intellectual idea.

Also, it is important to know that for John the world is a pretty miserable place and humanity is not held in high esteem by John. For John, the world is not a God forsaken place. Quite the contrary; it is a place where people would rather keep control and follow their own selfish interests and desires rather than enter into relationship with the Divine, with the Creator. It is not a *God-forsaken* place; rather the world is a *god-forsaking* place. John is saying that Jesus is the light – the Goodness of God – come into the world, but most folks prefer the darkness of the human heart.

Today's passage includes Jesus' first prediction of his death, but it also points to the resurrection and the Son's reunion with the Father by his ascension into the Divine realm. It is only by being willing to live into the Spirit, by accepting God's grace, that we can see through the cross of the darkness of this world as we have made it, and into the light of God's unfailing love as will be seen in the resurrection into eternal life in God.

Jesus points away from himself in talking with Nicodemus and points instead to God's faithful love and saving action. He reminds Nicodemus of part of the Exodus story. It is a story that Nicodemus as a Jew would know well. The Israelites are wandering in the desert being led by the God who freed them from slavery into the Promised Land. They are losing hope and complain bitterly that they are not getting what they want when they want. They curse God and the life sustaining food and drink that God provides for them, calling it "miserable food". Outraged by their ingratitude, God has poisonous snakes appear that kill many of them. But the people, again in danger, repent and turn to God. God tells Moses to make an object – an image of a poisonous snake on a pole, telling him that everyone who looks upon it

shall be healed. The image, of course, is only a symbol and not an idol. Only those willing to look at God's sustaining and saving love and action are able to see beyond themselves and their ailments and complaints and, thus, are open to healing.

Interestingly, the bronze serpent fashioned by Moses was preserved. According to 2 Kings 18:4, it was later destroyed by good King Hezekiah because it had ceased to be viewed as a sign of God's faithfulness and love and instead had been turned into an idol that the people made offerings to. The people had found it more satisfying to worship an idol – their own actions which they could control – than to see and trust beyond the image into God's promise of faithfulness and relationship. A lot of people are still into this behavior. We humans can turn even the Bible or the Church into idols.

There are a lot of people struggling with faith in our times. We wonder why? Martin Heidegger once gave this answer: "We are too late for the gods and too early for Being." What I think he meant is that much belief and faith can be caused by our fears or sense of wonder and astonishment. These are triggered by things that we can't control or things we can't understand. We've lost the gods because many of the things that caused fear and astonishment – natural disasters, illness, famines, even childbirth are now understood or we hope will soon be understandable. Our sense of human control in modern Western society is eliminating the old fears and wonder that once fed belief.

However, I think we fool ourselves if we think we have lost the need for a sense of transcendence and for living and trusting in the Creative, Living God. Like Nicodemus, our sense of self-sufficiency and understanding is overblown. In verse twelve and following in our Gospel reading, the pronoun "you" shifts from second

person singular to second person plural. Jesus is including all of us in his admonition to trust and live into the future our ever faithful God is calling us to. He prepares us to see the cross not as an idol, a talisman, but to see it as a demonstration of God's love for all Creation. As we approach Jerusalem and Calvary, Jesus invites us to look through the death of the cross into the eternal creative power of the Creator: to the love of God that is Being – that which is, was and will ever be.

Amen.