

March 22, 2009: “Believe Into” Jesus! – Rev Steven R. Mitchell

Fourth Sunday of Lent, St Paul’s UCC, Seattle

John 3:13–21; Numbers 21:4–9; Eph 2:1–10

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Lent. That period of time that we in the church take time out, 40 days specifically (those are 40 business days), for contemplation about our relationship to God, Christ, our planet and of one another.

Each congregation approaches this time differently. As a church we journey through this time with varying activities and observances. We started off with a joint service of Ash Wednesday with Luther Memorial Lutheran Church and our sister church Broadview Community UCC. On Friday evenings there is a small group who gather and attending the film series that is called, “Voices Not Heard”. This past Friday was dealing with the human rights issue of same sex marriage; last week it was discussing misunderstandings between Faith communities, specifically between the Christian/Muslim/ and Hebrew faith communities. The first week was examining self-images of women who are Native American/ Black/Latino/Asian/European Jew/European Christian, as well as those who come from bi-racial backgrounds and how they are affected by living in our society. Next we are going to be confronted with the issue of Transgender and gender re-assignment with the film titled, “Call Me Malcolm.” I can guarantee you that this will be pressing the envelope of comfortability for some who will be attending. Then we will finish on Good Friday with the film, 10 Questions I would like to ask the Dahlia Llama. The final observance that we as a church will observe before celebrating Easter Sunday will be to celebrate Lent with a combined service that is traditionally called Maundy Thursday Service, at Broadview UCC, again with Luther Memorial Church joining us.

Some of us take on a personal challenge of contemplation during

Lent. I heard this last week in choir where one person was giving up chocolate during Lent. Another person was going through a specific personal devotional time on a daily basis. I have chosen for my devotional time this Lent to listen to the 1970's musical, Godspell, on a daily basis and reflect upon the message in the music. I was also going to write out those reflections and post them on my blog, but that piece I haven't accomplished.

Lent is a good time for questions to be asked and examined, such as: where am I at in my relationship with God; do I recognize God's partnership in the daily drudgery of my life; and how aware am I of local and national social justice issues and how do I participate in those issues.

Today's lectionary readings from the Hebrew scriptures, the Psalms, the Epistles and the Gospels are so rich in presenting these questions, that every one of us should find something in one of these readings that make us feel some discomfort. My skin starts to crawl when I think about snakes. My sensibility is ruffled when I read about a God that brings on poisonous snakes as a means of punishment to those who were complaining; it seems a bit extreme to me as a way of dealing with the situation. Then there is the phrase in John, 3:16, "**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**" What about that person who is morally good and has never harmed anyone, but has never spoken those magic words, "I believe in Jesus Christ as my personal savior", are they doomed to eternal damnation? These are two of my discomforts with today's readings.

So let's take a journey through each of the readings and see what we might glean from these stories. Ronald Allen in his book Lord of Song explains the story of the snakes in the desert this way: "One of the last rebellious acts the people of the wilderness community committed against Yahweh and his servant Moses was on their way to Edom. As had happened so often in the past, the people became discouraged with their harsh life in the desert and as before, they complained that Moses should have left them in Egypt to die rather than to die in the unbearable wilderness. Food and water were scarce and the people hated the

detestable bread.

Worthless bread? It was manna from heaven the people were complaining about. Manna, the daily miracle of God's provision. Manna, the mark of God's grace. Manna, gift of God's love. But the people, in an all-too-human way, had turned on God's gift because of its very regularity..... In their contempt for manna they showed contempt for Yahweh. In spurning his gift of food, they spurned his daily grace.

God caused them great grief by bringing into their midst venomous snakes which caused a terrible plague about the people. Then, in an abrupt and surprising manner, God had Moses make a bronze image of one of those detestable snakes and held it high on a pole. Whoever would look at that snake image on the pole would be spared from painful death by the snake venom. They had contemned God's gift; he made an object of contempt the only means for their life."

A question this 4th Sunday of Lent: What gifts from God, have you become tired of and complain and no longer appreciate? What snakes are in your life? What would God tell you to hang up on a pole to look at as a reminder of the love God wants to share with you? [take a few minutes and search your heart for the answer]

Let's move onto the Gospel reading. John 3:16 has become one of the most misunderstood and inappropriately used passages of scripture since it was penned. It has been used by the church as a means to beat people up, to exclude and divide humanity and to lord power over one another. The strength for this abusiveness comes in verse 18, "**Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.**"

In the translation called The Message, we hear a slightly differing verbiage, "**This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.Anyone that trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing**

it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him."

This selection of scripture is the latter part of the story of Nicodemus, a Pharisee and prominent leader among the Jews, coming under the cover of night to visit with Jesus trying to discern who Jesus was. Nicodemus states, **"Rabbi, we all know you're a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren't in on it."** Jesus said, **"You're absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it's not possible to see what I'm pointing to - to God's Kingdom."** "How can anyone," said Nicodemus, **"be born who has already been born and grown up? You can't re-enter your mother's womb and be born again. What are you saying with this 'born-from-above' talk?"** Jesus said, **"You're not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation - the 'wind-hovering-over-the-water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life- it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. When you look at a baby, it's just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can't see and touch - [the Spirit] - and becomes a living spirit."**

Too often we pass over the corner stone of John 3:16 and this is where I believe the misunderstanding has come and why the ability to abuse somebody with this concept has come about. "No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man." In the Hebrew scriptures Ezekiel used the phrase, son of man, 90 times, referring in every case where God is speaking to his prophet as the human agent for the divine message. In the book of Daniel, the idea of the son of man takes on the understanding of a Messianic title. Meaning "He who is the victor over the "evil" one at the end of time." Quoting from Ronald Allen, "The term also suggests the mystery of the Incarnation. From our perspective, the amazing thing about Jesus of Nazareth is that he, a man, was truly God. Perhaps we may say that from the perspective of deity, the amazing thing was the he, truly God, was now truly man." Pg 28-29.

Jesus continued saying to Nicodemus, “In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.” Here Jesus is predicting his death to Nicodemus.

The message that Jesus is trying to tell us, is that our salvation, if you will, comes from the Spiritual connection we have with God. We can only recognize God because God’s spirit has descended into us. That is the One who came down from God’s presence. The message the church should be giving to the world is not “believe in Jesus, but rather “believe into” Jesus. For too long, fairly or not, John 3:16 has been associated with escapism, with fire insurance (believe X and get your “get out of hell free” card.) Methodist study guide for 4th Sunday Lent

Thus John 3:16 is not referring primarily to believing things about the life, execution, and resurrection of Jesus, but rather by following in Jesus’ way. Eternal life is thus not a “thing” we get when we give assent to the right theology, but rather the reality in which we live as we follow the one who is Way, Truth and Life.

I would like to close with some thoughts from the letter to the Ephesians: **“Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It’s God’s gift from start to finish! We don’t play the major role. If we did, we’d probably go around bragging that we’d done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.”**

Let the words from the Song, Day by Day, which is from Godspell and was number 13 on the music charts in 1973, be the challenge for your 4th Sunday of Lent. **“Day by day, Day by day, Oh Dear Lord three things I pray. To see thee more clearly; Love thee more dearly; Follow thee more nearly. Day by day! AMEN!**