

March 22, 2020 – Lent IV – Online/Remote Worship Service

Grace to you and peace from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Welcome to worship today.

Message – Worth Saving

So...how was everyone's week?
Have you become a news junkie,
staying tuned in to CBC News or the network of your choice?
Braved the grocery stores?
Had a much less busy week than usual?
Felt frustrated and hemmed in,
and worried about the state of the world?

I, for one, spent some time doing all of those things;
I also pondered important questions like "how do I stop touching my face"
and "how many packages of toilet paper
does one family really need, anyway."

As fortunate as we have been so far in Lambton County
to have no positive tests for COVID-19
– and that may have begun to change by the time you hear
or watch this message –
our lives have become challenging,
simple errands have become laden with anxiety,
our ability to connect with one another
has become diminished...
...and when it comes to making plans for next week or even next month,
well, we're all playing it by ear
and taking it one day at a time.

And then I read our Scripture passage for today,
especially that favorite memory-verse, John 3:16:
"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."

Our suddenly very messy world...
...this is the world that Jesus came into.
This is the world that God sent his Son into,
Because he thought it worth saving.
And as dark as things are right now,
I cannot help but believe
that this is still true.

The world that we are living in today
– politically tense, economically uncertain,
full of grief and worry and loss,
in the midst of a global public health crisis –
this is still the world that Jesus came into.
This is still the world God thinks is worth saving.
This is still the world that God pours out
his grace and mercy upon;
it is not a lost cause,
or lost to the dark.

This is the world God sent Jesus into,
in order that it might be saved through him.
This is the world God loves.

What a beautiful and hopeful promise this is.

The Gospel of John is a little different than Matthew, Mark and Luke.
John tells the story of Jesus' life and death and resurrection
from a very spiritual, almost mystical perspective.
The Gospel opens – not with Jesus' birth or baptism –
but at the beginning of all things:
“In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.”
The Word, we know, is Jesus.
And with Jesus, life
– the light of all people –
came into being, too.

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it.

Nicodemus was a man who was skirting the edges of the light;
not quite ready to step into it,
not quite able to stay in the dark.
He comes to see Jesus at night.

As the conversation unfolds,
we learn a little more about him:
that he is a practising, devout Jew,
and a religious leader and scholar.
Nicodemus is intrigued by Jesus,
believes Jesus is of God...
...but he's got questions.
But the answers Jesus gives him,
they don't make sense.
How can someone be born a second time, Nicodemus asks.
And Jesus gives him what sounds like poetry
– the wind blows where it chooses –
and he speaks of the Son of Man,
making an obscure reference to an incident
that happened during Israel's
long exile (Numbers 21).

Nicodemus, a scholar and a leader,
an intelligent, willing and thoughtful man,
can't understand Jesus.
But he continues to linger in the shadows,
on the edges of the light that is Jesus.

Nicodemus reappears twice more in the Gospel of John:
at the midpoint of Jesus' ministry,
when things are heating up between Jesus
and the Jewish religious leaders,
Nicodemus speaks to the other leaders,
reminding them that their own law
required a hearing in court

before passing judgement;
helping, yes,
but still on the edges,
in the shadowy space
between light and dark.
He appears again after Jesus is crucified,
to help Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus,
bringing a truly generous and royal gift
of nearly 100lbs of myrrh and aloe.
Generous, in his own way;
not very useful or necessary,
as it will turn out on Easter morning.

For any poetry fans out there, hesitant, *status quo*-loving Nicodemus
kind of reminds me of T.S. Eliot's poem,
The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock...
a man who exists poised on the brink of deciding
to do something for his whole life...
but never quite manages it.

Although Nicodemus lingers on the edges of Jesus' life and ministry,
never quite managing to openly commit and believe,
he is an important man,
when it comes to how we understand
what it means to believe.
Nicodemus represents a body of people within the crowd that surrounded Jesus,
that are supportive,
but do not fully understand.

We see his confusion in this Gospel story
when he hears Jesus' explanation of what it means to be born from above,
when Jesus tries to explain and encourage him to believe
and Nicodemus can only ask, "How can these things be?"

Nicodemus is not disagreeing or denying Jesus,
or telling Jesus he is wrong.
In fact, Nicodemus says to Jesus,
"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher

who has come from God;
for no one can do these signs that you do
apart from the presence
of God.”
Nicodemus believes Jesus,
but he just does not fully understand him...
...and so, lingering at the edges,
in the space between light and dark,
old life and born-again new life,
Nicodemus remains.

Nicodemus represents the kind of cautious, hesitant follower of Jesus,
who might easily have come out and spoken more openly for Jesus,
who might easily have believed and been transformed by his faith
but never quite made it.
I think many of us could often
be described in the same way.

We believe in Jesus, but we still have a lot of questions;
and sometimes those questions cause us to step back
and be a little bit hesitant.

On another Sunday, I might have led us toward reflecting on
Nicodemus’ hesitancy in terms of our own passivity,
our own hesitant, indecisive proclamation of our faith
when we still have so many unanswered questions.

But this Sunday, I find myself wondering if our unanswered questions,
if our struggle to understand,
makes us hesitant to really lean into and rely on our faith.
Because I think, in many ways,
we live in a world where we think
in order to believe in something,
we have to understand it completely.

We believe in gravity because we can see an apple hit the ground
when we drop it, and so we understand what it does.
We believe in the wind, because we can see its effect,

see it move clouds and storms, feel it blow over us,
and so we understand that it's real.
Belief and understanding
go hand-in-hand these days.

But that is not what Jesus says to Nicodemus.
Jesus says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
that everyone who *believes* in him...may have eternal life."

Not those who understand.
Not those who get how it works.
Not those who have all the answers.
Not those who lead the perfect life.
Not those who never find themselves
surrounded by chaos.

Everyone who *believes* in him...may have eternal life.

The Gospel of John,
where this passage of scripture comes from
and the only Gospel where Nicodemus appears,
is, as I said, very different from the other Gospels.
It is spiritual, almost mystical in tone,
focused on unfolding before us who Jesus is
and why that matters.

John forces us, as the reader,
to suspend the notion that we have to understand everything.
Instead, we are granted permission,
set free, to be swept up
into this narrative of light and dark,
grace and brokenness,
trust and truth.
We are invited to lean into our beliefs, to uncritically rest in them,
to hear what our hearts speak to us about Jesus,
and not necessarily what we can explain on a physical level.

In the passage we just heard,

Jesus talks about what it means to be born from above,
to be born of both water and Spirit
and to believe in both earthly and heavenly things.
And despite what Jesus seems to think
are fairly straight-forward answers,
Nicodemus does not
completely understand.

If I am being honest, when I read this,
I do not completely understand how that works, either.
But again, Jesus tells Nicodemus
– a man who believes in Jesus, yet is still hesitant
and asking questions –
Jesus tells him that God gave his Son
so we can believe in him,
not necessarily
so we can make sense of it all.

And that has been my hope this week.

That I do not have to understand the world around me
or explain what is happening in order to believe
in the hope and the promise of resurrection.

That our world is still very much worth saving.

That we can live in this very human world and navigate our very human lives,
while still leaning into our faith,
rooting ourselves deeply in it,
resting on our spiritual foundation
that comes from God.

And that, in a way that we may never see or understand,
God will take the chaos of the world today
– including Coronavirus and all the suffering and fear
and economic distress it's causing
– and somehow make it holy.

Because this messy world is the world that Jesus came into.

This is the world that is not a lost cause,
but considered worthy of grace and redemption
and new, abundant life.

We are not lost to the dark;
this is the world that God loves,
and he thinks it's worth saving.

Don't ever stop believing that.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.