

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today’s Gospel comes to us from smack in the middle of a much larger conversation Jesus is having with a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a religious leader of Jesus’ day. He comes to Jesus by night, no doubt because he doesn’t want anyone to know of his visit to Jesus.

Among the other religious leaders to whom Nicodemus is accountable, Jesus was a somewhat suspicious character, to say the least. Nevertheless, Nicodemus goes to him.

By coming to Jesus at night, he is, in ways of which he is no doubt consciously unaware, coming out of darkness, into light. That is what this passage is about. That is what our life and faith are about: stepping out of darkness into light.

So Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, and Nicodemus has asked Jesus how he does the marvelous things he does – the healings, the preaching coming forth with force and depth that go way beyond rote memorization and citing sources.

Jesus, by way of an “answer,” simply tells Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of God without some kind of experience of new birth. “Birth” is a very concrete, physical happening. It is not simple participation in a ritual.

It is not the formation of theological opinions. It is something that happens to you, over which you have no control. You cannot cause or arrange or orchestrate your own birth.

But all this comes before today’s Gospel text. We pick up Jesus’ lecture to Nicodemus in mid-paragraph. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus – but really, he’s talking past Nicodemus. He’s talking to those whom Nicodemus represents.

He’s talking to religious leaders – you know, people who presume to stand behind pulpits and teach about judgment and righteousness and who’s saved and who’s not! Jesus is talking to those religious leaders “back then,” and to religious leaders now and always.

Jesus is talking to anyone who has questions about “see[ing] the kingdom of God” (John 3:3), or about righteousness, or salvation. Jesus is talking to us. In short, Jesus says, “You want to know what ‘salvation’ really is? Start by looking at that serpent that Moses held up in the wilderness.”

Back when the Israelite people left Egypt, chasing the freedom from slavery that they said they wanted, the journey took them into the wilderness. But really, that “wilderness” was more like what we today would call a desert.

There was no food, no water, not much of anything, but rocks, dirt, and sand – and the occasional oasis decked out with a bit of green and a brown pond. Those children of Israel were suffering.

And they laid on Moses (on God, really) a complaint they made time and time again (really, just as we would do if we were in circumstances like that): What have you done to us? Why have you brought us out into this desert to die slowly and miserably of hunger and thirst? We were better off in Egypt! At least there we had food!

So, the story goes, God in his righteous anger sent poisonous serpents to strike them, and many died. The people repented of their ingratitude toward God for giving them what they wanted, and they asked Moses to pray for them.

And God instructed Moses to make a replica, out of bronze, of the poisonous serpents that were biting them and set it up on a pole. Whenever a person was bitten, he or she could look upon that bronze serpent Moses had lifted up, and live (Numbers 21:4-9).

So, in effect, Jesus is saying, “Consider me to be that bronze serpent! You want to know what salvation looks like? Look at me! I am salvation! Salvation is why I came! God sent me into this world full of snakes that bite to save, not to condemn.” Why is it that we are so quick and glib in quoting John 3:16, and not John 3:17? Why do we stop at verse 16, when 17 is just as important?

Maybe verse 17 is more important! “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).

That’s what we are about; that’s the message we are to proclaim to all the world. God, in Jesus Christ, came into the world, and is in the world now, not to condemn but to save, not to judge but to acquit!

That’s why I’m here, Jesus says. Jesus says, I didn’t come as a judge, or a lawgiver – we’ve got enough laws already. Anyway, law can’t save; it can only tell us what’s wrong. Law can’t save; if you want to be saved – look at me!

Jesus says to Nicodemus, and to those whom Nicodemus represents, and to any who care to listen, I came to save. I came to heal. I came to bring light – God’s light. That’s it. Jesus brings light – God’s light, the light of God’s Spirit.

There is plenty of darkness in the world. Jesus came to shine a light, to be light. He didn’t come to shove people into darkness. He doesn’t push people into darkness. God does not throw people into darkness. People choose darkness.

But the light is still there, and the darkness does not overcome it. Have you had enough darkness?

Do you want light? Look at Jesus. Believe in Jesus. Follow Jesus, without looking to the right or to the left. If you think life sometimes bites like a brood of nasty snakes, if you are sorry because you have been a snake in the past, look at Jesus, and you will live.

You will be led to freedom, real freedom, the only freedom there is. You will begin to find your way out of your wilderness. Look at Jesus. Trust him. Follow him. Your new life, your new path, your new way begins there.

This is not a call to pass judgment on people of other faiths, or of no faith. We need to refrain from passing judgment. In fact, we need to be ready to welcome such people, especially if they come back out of dark places. (Yes, one of the risks of having no faith is ending up in a dark place!)

What does it mean to “believe in Jesus”? Who believes? Who does not believe? Note that this text says that “those who do not believe are condemned already,” which is to say they are not condemned after they disbelieve.

Salvation or condemnation are not the result of prior belief or unbelief; salvation is not a reward and condemnation is not a punishment. What saves? What condemns? God does not condemn anybody. People condemn themselves by refusing to believe in what we are shown in Jesus Christ. People condemn themselves by refusing to look at the light that is Christ.

What does it mean to “believe in” Jesus? There are a number of opinions about that. You have yours. Others have theirs. Don’t worry about a heavy theological definition. That’s not what this is about.

So, does this mean that non-Christians are then condemned? There are a number of opinions about that too. You no doubt have yours. Others have theirs. Don’t worry about that, either. That’s not what this is about.

There are indeed people out there who love darkness rather than light, and who willfully and consciously seek darkness because they want nothing to do with the kind of light that Jesus shines.

And there are indeed people of other faiths – and, yes, people of no explicit or specific faith – who for all our differences seem to be looking in the same direction Jesus is. That has to be a good thing, so I would say, don’t over-think this!

Just look at Jesus. Trust him. Follow him. He did not come to bring condemnation and judgment. He came to bring healing and salvation and light. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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