

## *Held in God's Love*

The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 7-22;  
Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

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

A couple of years back, our women's Nawakwa Winter Book Group read the novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*. I believe they found it to be quite a good read. It was written by Sue Monk Kidd, and some of you may also have read it. If you haven't, and you'd like some good reading, I suggest you try it. But Sue Monk Kidd had written two other books right at the beginning of her career; they're memoirs of how she became involved and grew and developed her Christian contemplative spiritual life.

In her second book, called *When the Heart Awakes*, she writes about an incident that occurred when she was pregnant with her second child. Her three year old son Bob had been afraid of the dark. Sue tried everything. She tried leaving a light on in the hall. And a nightlight in Bob's bedroom. Nothing she did helped; he was still scared of the dark and would cry out in the middle of the night. One night as she held him against her to comfort him, he touched her round, swollen abdomen and asked, "Mama, is it dark in there where my little brother is?" (He was convinced that this yet unborn baby would be a boy.) "Yes," his loving mother replied, "it is dark in there."

Darkness is a major theme in our Gospel lesson this morning. It recounts the conclusion of Nicodemus' visit to Jesus in the middle of the night. Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews, a Pharisee.

Poor old Pharisees have an undeserved reputation as being the bad guys, the sworn enemies of Jesus, but it's a gross misconception to think that way. Actually, they were dedicated servants of God, sworn to give their lives to serving and pleasing God by keeping God's law and studying His word. But there was even more to it than that. There was also the expectation of solidarity with other members of the group, of finding one's identity primarily in the company of other Pharisees and then presenting a united front.

Nicodemus saw Jesus as a man of God, of deep faith. He was attracted to Jesus, and curious, but he was in an awkward position. When he was speaking to Jesus, he was speaking only as Nicodemus the individual, but as a representative of the Pharisees and all they believed and stood for. That meant that when he approached Jesus, he had to come apart from the group and make sure he was not observed meeting Him, and so he did it under the cover of darkness.

But the night isn't the only darkness that plagues Nicodemus. He was plagued by not being able to grasp or understand what it was that God was doing in and through Jesus. His conversation

with Jesus revolved around seeing and belonging to the kingdom of God. But that conversation left him only confused and bewildered.

And what, beloved, about our darkneses and our confusions and our bewilderments? Of our concern about our standing in God's eyes, and the outcome of our salvation?

These are the questions that Lent puts before us as we examine our relationship with Christ and our commitment to him. If we're really honest, it isn't long, is it, before we succumb to a sort of bookkeeping. We are sharply aware (or at least we think we are) of what our balance sheet might look like. Somehow, I don't know why, it seems easier for us to recall the things we've done wrong, the mistakes, the sins, and in no time at all, we feel that we're doomed. Even when we think about the good things we've done – the sacrifices we've made, the risks we've taken in Christ's name – we know, don't we, that the bad stuff outweighs the good . . . at least that's what it seems like, and in no time, we're in the dark. Why is it that we can so easily recall the negative stuff, and find it so hard to find the good?

Young Bob lay quietly beside his mother; he was thinking about darkness, too – especially the darkness that enveloped his young brother. He raised his head and looked at his mother, and asked in a very worried voice, "He doesn't have a night light, does he?" "No," Sue responded, "not even a night light."

I wonder if Nicodemus felt that he was getting wrapped up in the ever deepening darkness, with no light in it at all, until Jesus reminded him of a much earlier darkness experienced by the people of Israel in their journey through the desert. We heard the story in our first lesson this morning. As a result of willfulness, of impatience, of turning from God and trying to do things to get their salvation for themselves, they were punished with a plague of poisonous serpents. It didn't take long before they were unable to cope and, full of fear for their lives, they approached Moses and asked him to intercede with God for them. And God's instruction was simple: make a bronze serpent and raise it up on a pole. Those bitten by a snake need only raise their eyes and look at the pole, and they would be healed.

Raising up salvation on a pole. It's precisely at this point that Jesus makes the connection, not only for Nicodemus, but for the world, and for you and me this very morning. He too will be raised up on the cross, that Nicodemus, and we, might know the real and loving saving power of God in Christ. Make no mistake, God acts in order to save the world, to send it light, to rescue it from itself – not to condemn it, not to punish it, not to destroy it. For the astounding reality and truth is that God loves the world. And whether we can cope with it or not, He loves it universally, without hesitation, without any limits. God loves every human being.

The thing of it is that God's act of salvation also turns out to be an act of judgment, but we'd better be careful how we think about that. Do you notice what Jesus says, that those who do not believe, those who do not trust, those who turn their backs, are condemned already; this is not some sort of future punishment. It exists in the present, the here and now, they're condemned already. What then of us, beloved? Well, we certainly haven't turned our backs on God, otherwise we wouldn't be sitting here this morning. No, our fear is that even though we are here,

we still might be condemned. Yet the reality is that we are the beloved, to whom God sent His only son, that trusting in Him, we might find ourselves saved.

As the Gospel proclaims, Jesus was not sent in the world to condemn us, but to save us. God knows how we struggle with that promise, and with our own human sense of unworthiness. God is fully aware of our fears, that somehow we don't measure up, or somehow we won't measure up, or somehow we might not measure up. But measuring up isn't the point. The point is that God enters human history to save His people, simply because He loves them. You're a beloved of God, whether you feel it or know it or believe it, you're His beloved.

To assure us of that love, and to set us at ease from our fears and doubts, we've been given a very simple meal of bread and wine. It's a way in which we actually touch Christ, and Christ touches us, in His Body and Blood. And it provides a real way for us to know that we are beloved, forgiven, and made right with God. If nothing else, we can think back to receiving this meal and know that we are forgiven and beloved.

So, what's the catch? There isn't one! All we're left to do is to show God our thankfulness and our gratitude. And how do we do that? By living towards others as He has lived towards us in Christ, with compassion and understanding and forgiveness.

And Bob? Well, Bob had one more question for his mother that night, "Do you think my brother is scared, all by himself in there?" "I don't think so," Sue explained, "because he's not really alone; he's inside of me." It was a very special moment between mother and son. Suddenly, Sue had an inspiration. "And it's the same way with you!" she explained to her son, "When it's dark and you think you're all by yourself, you really aren't. I carry you inside me, too. I carry you in my heart."

Sue remembers looking into her son's eyes, and wondering if he understood what she meant. Having nothing else to say, Bob went back to bed and was soon asleep. And that, beloved, that was the last time he woke up screaming in the middle of the night.

Sue goes on to say, "First, God is only 'up there.' Then God is sort of 'all around.' Next I began to see that God was also 'within me.' And now, most shocking of all, I was finding that I am and always was 'within God.'"

So too, beloved, are you.

Amen.