

Sermon, Lent 4B, 3/10/24, St. David's, Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Happy Refreshment Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent and one of only two Sundays each year when we get the rose-colored vestments and hangings. Today is supposed to be a little break from the rigors of Lent, so while we still don't say "alleluia," we do get flowers. In England, this Sunday is celebrated as Mothering Sunday.

But today's readings don't seem to match this refreshment very much, in my opinion. We have the strange story of Moses and a snake and a stick, and we hear that one because in the Gospel, Jesus compares that story with the snake to the Son of Man being lifted up. In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus is speaking with Nicodemus, who had come to him by night. In other words, Nicodemus didn't want to be seen with Jesus at that point, even though he recognized that Jesus came from God.

Jesus had just explained to Nicodemus that one needs to be born again, which Nicodemus found confusing. I'm sure the story of the snake didn't clear much up for him. And then Jesus went on to say that famous verse John 3:16, which some football fans hold up at games, and which some Christians describe as "the gospel in a nutshell": "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." In the Episcopal church that verse is so beloved that it's included as one of the five options of "comfortable words" used in Rite I before the passing of the peace.

This verse was one of the first ones I ever preached about, my very first sermon ever, in 2002. I was very honest in my sermon about how the verse made me uncomfortable because while it expresses God's love for the whole world, it has sometimes been interpreted in exclusionary ways: if all who believe in God's son will not perish but have eternal life, then what happens to those who do not believe in him? I spoke about Jewish people and other friends in faith who believe differently than I do and wondered what these verses meant for them.

Well, that was not very popular with one member of the congregation, who later told the vestry and the rector that he didn't think I should become ordained because I didn't have a solid enough understanding that people who don't believe in Jesus are going to hell. The rector explained to this angry man that if all Episcopal clergy who believed the same way I did were unable to be priests that we wouldn't have very many. He was not appeased, but I did end up getting ordained. I continue to feel and express discomfort with exclusion, and the way that verses that can be comforting are sometimes used as cudgels.

That experience with the angry parishioner brings me to another theme in today's readings: complaints. In this morning's Numbers reading, the people became impatient and complained. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and water, and we detest this miserable food." How quickly they overcame their gratitude for being brought out of slavery and devolved into complaining.

But I suspect I would have done the same thing. I cannot fathom literally wandering in the wilderness for forty *years*. Metaphorically spending forty days in the wilderness every Lent is hard enough.

I complain to poor Gary constantly: about cancer and all the appointments I have to go to; about the various side effects of my treatment; about the diocese and annoyances of day-to-day life.

I'm not the only complainer here this morning, but I have noticed that all of you complain to me less than you used to before the pandemic, and I'm not sure what to make of that sometimes. Have the complainers all left, or are we all just more grateful now, or is it because I no longer stand at the back of the church and shake hands with every one of you as you leave so you don't have as many opportunities to tell me that the church is too hot or too cold or too noisy or you hate that particular piece of music? I prefer to think that we are all more grateful now, but I suspect the lack of a Sunday greeting line is more likely the answer.

What do you think Jesus thought of complaints and critics? Jesus' words in today's Gospel were to Nicodemus, the religious leader who came to Jesus by night, presumably to avoid critics who would not approve of him going to this man they considered a rabble-rouser. We may be tempted to be hard on Nicodemus for not being more transparent in his interest in Jesus, but I admire the way he sought Jesus out and asked questions and was willing to look foolish.

In addition, we see progress in Nicodemus over the course of John's Gospel. Sure, at this point in chapter 3 he came by night, but later in chapter 7, when some of Nicodemus's colleagues were talking about arresting Jesus, Nicodemus bravely spoke up for Jesus. And then in in chapter 19, after the crucifixion, Nicodemus again went to Jesus, that time in broad daylight with seventy-five pounds of spices and used them to wrap Jesus up and bury him in a new tomb.

I hear John 3:16 as a core verse of the Bible, or the Gospel in a nutshell as some say, but I also, all these decades after my first sermon, still struggle with the idea that people who believe differently than I do are doomed. That seems like the height of arrogance to me. So I hope to become more like Nicodemus: to ask questions, to allow myself to look foolish, and to grow into my faith to the point that I can speak up for Jesus when others speak against him.

We are more than halfway through Lent. Easter is in three weeks. How has this season in the wilderness been for you? Are you able to rejoice today?