

March 5, 2023: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ **Second Sunday in Lent** ~

“Jesus did not come to condemn the world!”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com

Scripture Reading: John 3 v 1-7

I. Introduction:

I want to preface my sermon by saying that in my heart of hearts I believe in God’s love for the whole world, and I believe in God’s grace upon all people, not just this or that group. I believe that God sees our hearts and our minds and sees our struggles and our joys. I do believe God understands that we have learned a lot in life and can draw on those various educational and all other experiences in life that make us who we are. And then, I also believe that despite all these experiences and gifts and talents we have acquired, we do not always have the answers from our own knowledge and experiences and accomplishments; and that life can sometimes throw us some curveballs which leave us with no or little inner resources to deal with them. I believe that God would want us to be in a relationship with God that shows how we rely on God for guidance, wisdom and all the things we need help with in our lives.

II. How profound a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

In our passage we encounter Nicodemus, who was a member of the Pharisees, a small group of the ruling elite of the time. The Pharisees held strictly to the Laws of the Torah and the traditions of the elders. Nicodemus himself seemed to have been born into an influential and aristocratic family and was a member of the Jewish Ruling Council. He was also a teacher of the Old Testament Laws and was seen as the most representative voice of the ruling elite. He came to Jesus during the night to have a conversation with Him, whom he calls Rabbi, and whom he acknowledges as coming from God, because of the things He had been doing, and the way He was speaking to the crowds.

Jesus knew whom He was encountering. He recognized Nicodemus as part of a group of religious leaders, who had their own beliefs about salvation. He did not think His visitor was just there to praise Him for the miracles He had been performing. There must be some other motivation for his visit. He also does not acknowledge Nicodemus' observation about who He is, as coming from God. He does thank Nicodemus for acknowledging Him as a fellow teacher. Instead, His reply in verse 3 takes the form of a challenge to Nicodemus, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he/she is born of water and the Spirit." He introduces the real purpose of why He is walking around and ministering and performing miracles. He is doing those things because they speak of something deeper than just following the law, which is important, but something more is needed. It is about being born again! There you go! It's out of Jesus' mouth! Jesus is telling him three times that to know the Kingdom of God, one must be born again. And of course, very confusing for Nicodemus who had no understanding what Jesus was talking about!

To enter the Kingdom of God, to enter eternal life, means to be born with water and spirit, says Jesus. The water referred to the water baptism by John the Baptist, which the Pharisees rejected, and to be born in the Spirit, is the new life which Jesus is here to give to those who believe in Him. A spiritual renewal is needed. Jesus tells him, "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. What is earthly, from the flesh, is what is natural to humanity, natural answers, our own natural experiences, and things we rely on, like the Law Nicodemus relies on. The Kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom, and it requires a spiritual rebirth. And that's why Jesus is here to give that to him and to humanity. Jesus' ministry, His death and resurrection are what introduces a spiritual renewal which leads humanity out of the darkness and sin into the light here on earth and into eternal life. All of this was too much for Nicodemus to comprehend, and so his only response is, "How can this be?"

How does one understand this? Jesus spoke of a spiritual life, which included a life in the Spirit, driven by the life of the Son of God who was sent into this world to love the world, and to help the world recognize its own darkness, its inability to save itself, and for

someone like Nicodemus, a prominent leader and teacher to see it too. This Jesus would die for the world to see the spiritual kingdom and experience it here and now.

III. Conclusion: Our time to reflect on this message from Christ...

After this whole episode with Nicodemus, we see John's reflection on all of this in verses 16 and following verses. He talks about how deep this love of God is for the world, so deep that God would let God's Son die for the salvation of the world. Not just for the Jews, but for all the world, and all nationalities of the world, then and today...all those who receive Him. He then goes further to explain that God sent God's Son not to condemn the world, but to save it from itself, because the world is already plunged in its own sin and darkness. What the world needs is the light and love of God's Son to save it, and those who choose not to accept his gift, will be condemned by their own choice not to receive Him. It is their own choice, not God's.

At the beginning I told you how I believe in God's love for the world and God's grace upon all people. Maybe not everyone gets it how much God loves us all. Maybe there are those who believe they have their own answers for the world's problems, and do not need to ask God for help. Maybe some are thinking God does not have the time for their problems. Others may not feel worthy in God's eyes. Whatever our thoughts and beliefs are, it is clear that we need many more answers and help to save ourselves in this world as we know it. What Jesus is offering Nicodemus and what John is reflecting upon is for the world to know God's love reaches beyond our own understanding, so at least acknowledge Christ and His Name, because He is here to love all of humanity. In essence Jesus is declaring, I know, because I've been in heaven, and I came here to see for myself what's the problem. I see the earthly kingdoms and I know the heavenly one too. I am here, not to condemn you, but to be with you, to love you, and to guide you and to save you from your own condemnation. So, I am wondering how you as congregation and as a community would reflect this week about Jesus' offer to us, to the world and all its leaders? How would you respond if Jesus were to be in our presence and have this conversation with us. I am curious to see what you have to say...may God bless you and your own reflection on this message from the heart of Christ during this second week of Lent. Amen