

March 10, 2024
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Laetare Sunday

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

Lenten Reading John 3:1-8 John and Connie Morgan

Reader 1: Friends, we ask you again to observe a holy Lent. With prayer, fasting, and demonstrating the love of Christ through benevolent acts, we prepare for Holy Week and the passion of our Lord and Savior.

Reader 2: In John's gospel we read:

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." "How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Prayer St. Columba, 521-597

Kindle in our hearts, dear God,

**the flame of love that never ceases,
that it may burn in us, giving light to others.**

May we shine forever in your temple,

set on fire with your eternal light,

Your Son, Jesus Christ,

our Savior and Redeemer. Amen.

*Hymn 802 The King of Love My Shepherd Is, verses 1, 2, and 3.

Prayer of Confession

Holy One, you know our hearts. You have knitted our inmost being and you know our deepest desires, fears, and worries. Help us to journey during this Lenten season into a new awareness of your presence in our lives. Save us from our own temptations, so that we may more freely follow you. Amen.

Hymn Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

The Lord removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. In this is our great comfort in life. Friends, believe the good news. Our sins are forgiven. We may find rest in God's peace.

First Reading Psalm 23

Moments With Our Young Disciples

The Gospel Reading John 3:9-17

The Morning Message

This time last year Ed and I were on spring break with forty of our closest friends. We had just arrived in Dublin, Ireland. We were punchy with jet lag and very hungry. After we cleared the airport, our tour guide took us into the city and dropped us off where we could find something to eat. We recognized a familiar restaurant and headed that way. The building has shops on the ground floor and a large and lovely cafeteria style restaurant on the second floor.

Right away we noticed arrangements of fresh flowers everywhere. Signs were posted on shops wishing the city's women a "Happy Mother's Day." Upstairs in the café there were more flowers and a special menu on a sign board for Mother's Day. I was really interested in the offer of a complimentary glass of rose with lunch for all mothers. My husband gave me one of those looks to remind me we were on a school trip. I ordered a pot of tea.

We have taken several spring break trips to Ireland, but, apparently, we had missed the fourth Sunday in Lent, known in some cultures as Laetare Sunday. Laetare is Latin for "rejoice." It is a Sunday for the Church and her people to express joy in the midst of a solemn Lenten season. Vestments are pink on Laetare Sunday. By now you have figured out that it is quite similar to the third Sunday in Advent, "Gaudete Sunday," or Sunday of joy when we light the pink candle in the Advent wreath.

Laetare Sunday is also called "Mothering Sunday", a time in the church year for all the baptized to return to the church in which they were baptized, their "Mother Church." The customs we in the U.S associate with Mother's Day are also observed, thus the reason for the beautifully

decorated entrances to all the shops and signs on storefronts beckoning the public inside for “Mother’s Day specials.”

What I find really ironic is that today, Laetare Sunday, or Mothering Sunday, we have Nicodemus on a nighttime visit with Jesus that prompts a conversation about mothers, wombs, birthing...and re-birth.

Nicodemus has become curious about this new rabbi, Jesus. He goes to see him and asks how he can inherit eternal life. That is a powerful, naked question. It strikes at the heart of the matter. Some would say Nicodemus has everything. He was a Pharisee, one of the most devout Jews of his day. He was one of the most highly-educated people in his community. He was important, respected. He may have been somewhat wealthy.

Some have suggested that it is because of Nicodemus’s social position that he goes to Jesus at night...under cover of darkness so he wouldn’t be recognized. But, could it also be a sign of his sincerity? In that day, it was believed that the most serious, most intense study of a subject was undertaken at night. And so, here he was, a Jew, a scholar of the law, asking Jesus about life after death and how he can attain it. That’s pretty important.

It is an important subject for us, too. What do we understand in our reformed tradition about eternal life?

A good place to start is what we know of Jesus’ experience. The Jesus story is our story, too. That Jesus died, was raised, ascended into heaven, and sits at God’s right hand prefigures our own story. We will follow him. This means our confessions of faith describe the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in a way that we can learn and internalize so they become a part of us.

From the earliest confessions, it is understood that we are destined, when we die, to follow Jesus into the very presence of God.

The Scots Confession declares: “The chosen departed are at peace, and rest from their labors, not that they sleep and are lost in oblivion as some fanatics hold, for they are delivered from all fear and torment, and all the temptations to which we and all God’s chosen are subject in this life.”

Westminster is even more precise, declaring that “the bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God.” In heaven, these souls “behold the face of God.”

If there is a Presbyterian narrative about life after death, this is it: when you die, your soul goes to be with God, where you enjoy God's glory and wait for the promised day of Christ's return, when he will draw all things to himself in ultimate redemption.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”

This is the gospel in a nutshell, isn't it? It is the most-often quoted verse in the Bible. And this was the ultimate answer to the deep and probing question Nicodemus asked of Jesus.

That verse says the origin of our salvation begins with God. God initiates a relationship with us. Why? Because God loves us and established a covenant with us way back in the day of Abraham and Sarah. We would be God's people and God would be our God. Out of love, God sent his Son to live among us, to be one of us, to teach us lessons of love and grace, to save us from our sins. Behind everything is the love of God.

I often quote a verse in First John at weddings: “God is love and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them.”

This is not the image of God that some present, of God as an angry monarch whose subjects must follow strict orders to please God. The God Jesus speaks of in his conversation with Nicodemus is the Father who cannot be satisfied until all his wandering children find their way home.

This answer tells of the width, the reach, the expanse of God's love. It is the whole world God loves. It is not a nation. It is not a race. It is not only the good people, or only the people who already love God. No. God sent God's Son into the world to save it. All of it. The unloved and the unlovely. The lonely who have no one else to love them. He came to save the immigrant and the aristocrat, the poor and the powerful, the scholar and the uneducated, the straight and the gay, the ones who love God and the one who spurns God's love. We are all included in God's wide embrace.

Augustine of Hippo, St. Augustine, said, “God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love.”

And you, child of the covenant, are one to love. You are the one Jesus came to save. So maybe this is the perfect day to re-visit your baptism. In baptism, we are grafted unto Christ; washed clean from sin; welcomed into the family of faith; and are marked as Christ's own forever.

We believe that eternal life begins with baptism, be it infant or believer's baptism. We live now in God's astonishing kingdom, experiencing it in part, but one day we will know it fully, even as we are fully known.

*Hymn 802 The King of Love My Shepherd Is Verses 4,5, and 6

*Affirmation of Faith Apostles' Creed p. 35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

All our resources are gifts from you, gracious Lord. In gratitude, help us to use them wisely, that we may serve the needs of your people and spread the good news of salvation near and far. Amen.

*Hymn 166 Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days

*Blessing

May the Three that are over you,
the Three that are below you,
the Three that are above you here,
the Three Who are above you yonder,
the Three Who are in the earth,
the Three Who are in the air,
the Three Who are in heaven,
the Three Who are in the great, pouring sea-
bless you.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Three in One and One in Three. Amen.

*Postlude