

4th Sunday in Lent
March 10, 2024

Num. 21:4-9; Ps. 107:1-9; Eph. 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

Back 40 years ago in my first parish, back in Elk County, we lived in a parsonage. Between the parsonage and the church was the church parking lot. When you looked out the bedroom window on the west side, you saw the parking lot (or people in the parking lot could see into your bedroom). One of the first things we noticed after moving in was how the parking lot was used. Of course, the parking lot was used for parking, for worship and other church activities.

But it was also used as a turnaround for people who wanted to change the direction of their travel. Sometimes it was used for a public restroom. Apparently, the radio reception was good, because from time to time people sat in the lot and listened to their CB's or their scanners. Sometimes cops would sit there for a speed trap or whatever. From time to time people would park in the lot late at night and stay there for hours. You could find evidence of them the next morning in the form of empty beer bottles. Our dog would sometimes wake us up barking at these people. I was never quite positive what they were doing there, but I could guess.

One night in 1980 we woke up to the sound of a woman screaming in the parking lot, being hysterical and begging for help. Now there was a spotlight for the parking lot we could control from the parsonage. When we turned the spotlight on, a van sped away with the woman still screaming.

I told the church council about this incident, and the property committee then modified the spotlight so that there was a dawn/dusk sensor gizmo and the spotlight would stay on all night. And that's the way it was the rest of the time we were living there.

But a funny thing happened when we had the spotlight on all night every night. Suddenly there weren't cars parking in the lot late at night, except when once in a while someone's car would break down. Whatever had been going on wasn't going on anymore - at least it wasn't going on in our parking lot. It reminded me of the Bible verse we had in the gospel lesson this

morning, "people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

Why did people avoid a well-lit parking lot? Because they didn't want other people to know what they were doing. *Everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.* If you are doing things you shouldn't be doing, you don't want anybody to know about it.

We all have things we'd rather not have exposed. All of us have secrets we keep even from those closest to us. We have a guilty conscience about something or other.

Guilty consciences come out in different ways. Sometimes in my ministry I would visit members who had been rather lax about their church attendance. Three out of four times I don't have to say anything at all; they volunteer "I suppose you're here because I haven't been coming to worship lately." I haven't said anything, and maybe I had a different reason for visiting, but their guilty conscience had to speak.

Another way to look at guilt is a lack of self-approval. We don't feel very worthwhile; maybe because we've been told that often. We can be aware of all sorts of little things we've done where we were dishonest or unfaithful or simply made fools of ourselves. If we told somebody else the story, they might say we were being silly, and the incident was trivial, and it happened a long time ago. That might be true, but it still bothers us, it still haunts us, perhaps late at night. I don't know about you, but I seem to have this internal mechanism that whenever I start feeling real proud or satisfied about something I've done, something reminds me of another time when I did something foolish or really messed up. I cut myself down to size.

There are all kinds of ways we can seek to deal with our guilt or lack of self-approval, and some of these ways are not real solutions, and some of them are downright harmful. One of the common reasons people give for joining cults is that they feel an acceptance and a place in the group they don't feel elsewhere. Some people try to buy friendship with gifts or manipulate others in being approving. Some people run away from themselves into alcohol or drugs.

Another thing people do with their secret self-knowledge is to be superficial. They will talk about the weather or the news or their gardens or sports or what's on TV or their children or their house or last night's dinner, or anything under the sun, but unless you listen closely and between the lines you'll never hear them talking about what really eats them, what's secretly inside them, what bothers them. They want to keep things in the dark, because they would rather have darkness than light.

We can be superficial with God too. Even in personal devotions, we can avoid the threat of the light by keeping Bible reading on an intellectual level, by praying for others but not for ourselves, by only making a general confession of sin and not naming specific sins. Deep inside ourselves, we have judged ourselves, and found our deeds to be evil; and preferring to keep this in the dark, we love darkness rather than light.

In chapter 8 of John's gospel, Jesus says, I am the light of the world. In John's first letter, he says that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. God's light is a searching light, like bringing a bright spotlight into a dark basement full of cobwebs and hidden corners. Everything on which it shines is laid bare. In God's light all hearts are open and no secrets are hid. We may try to retreat into the darkness, but we are only fooling ourselves. God sees us naked, stripped of games and defenses. In God's light we are visible to him and to ourselves.

And this can be painful. For God to know us, for anyone to know us, for us to know ourselves, can be painful. Truth can be painful. Yet it is also a healing. That is the secret of this passage.

John writes that God sent His Son, His light, into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. When God's light exposes us, it can be embarrassing and humiliating. But Jesus does not condemn us; he is not in the condemning business but the saving business. If we stand condemned, it is because we have condemned ourselves. But Jesus wants us to know that it is the person revealed in the spotlight, the true self, for whom he came, for whom he died, to whom he gives eternal life.

He didn't come for the well-scrubbed, Sunday best, everything's fine appearance we put on for the benefit of other people and sometimes for ourselves. He came for that secret person who lies awake at night, who knows their shortcomings too well and fears the exposure of their frailties, their sinfulness, and their dishonesty, that person we ourselves condemn. It is that person for whom Jesus died, for whom God gave his only Son. It was the woman taken in the act of adultery to whom Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

Can we believe it? Can we believe Jesus came into the world to save sinners? It makes much more sense to think he would come for good, respectable people. Those with a clean conscience, not a guilty one. But God so loved the world, we read: the whole world, not just part of it, not just one section of it. The whole world. Everybody. You included.

That is not something we naturally think. But that is the gospel: God who is rich in mercy, loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses, and by grace He raises us up and makes us sit in the heavenly places with Christ Jesus. Jesus is not here to condemn us. He is here to give us eternal life. There is no need to fear His light. In his light we see ourselves; but we also see the light of God, the light which is nothing but love for the whole world. Including you and me.

John alludes to the story we have in our Old Testament lesson. There the Israelites were doing what they always did best: complain. After 40 years they were tired of manna three meals a day. They were tired of not getting anywhere. Of course it was their own fault that they had to spend 40 years wandering, because they wouldn't trust that God could bring them into the Promised Land safely and victoriously. Now God is tired of them, and he sends snakes. The snakes bite many people and many die. And so, like usual, the people say, God, take away the snakes. We were wrong.

God doesn't take away the snakes. Instead, he instructs Moses to cast a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Then when someone was bit, they were to look at the bronze snake, and they would be healed. Now this meant two things. One was that they had to look at the snake, and it would be a

reminder of their sinfulness. And secondly they had to trust God that by looking at the snake, and confronting their sinfulness, they could be healed.

In the same way, John says, Jesus was going to be lifted up on the cross. If we look at that man on the cross, we are confronting ourselves. But when we look at Him in faith, then we can be saved. If we are unwilling to bring our darkness into the light, we can not see the man on the cross and be saved. If we are in denial about our true condition, John says we are condemned already.

But Jesus is not in the condemnation business. The Father loved this sinful lost world so much He gave His only Son, just so that we would not perish but have eternal life. In Greek the word "perish" is in something the Greek language has called the middle voice. The middle voice is different from the active or the passive; it is something you do to yourself. So what John 3:16 is saying is God gave His Son so we wouldn't destroy ourselves. We wouldn't wind up in condemnation, but instead have life.

But we have to look to the cross. There is salvation nowhere else. Only acknowledging our darkness, our deadness, can we find light and life. And that is what God wants for all of us, no matter what we have done. Whoever looks at Him and believes is saved.

Amen.