

Our New Testament reading this morning comes from John's gospel and tells the intriguing story of Jesus' late-night encounter with one of the Pharisees.

On this second Sunday of Lent, Jesus provides a lesson for his secret student, one that resonates with us today.

Here now a reading from the gospel of John 3:1-17.

**Here ends the** reading of God's holy word. May God add to our hearing and understanding, God's blessing. Amen.

Please pray with me.

God of amazing compassion, lover of our wayward race, you bring to birth a pilgrim people, and call us to be a blessing for ourselves and all the world.

We pray for grace to take your generous gift and step with courage on this holy path, confident in the radiant life that is your plan for us, made known and given in Jesus Christ our Lord.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Amen.

## **Sermon**

*For God so loved the world...* Do you know what this kind of love feels like? Do you allow yourself to feel the magnitude of this love? Can you comprehend the absolute, unconditional, eternal love that God has for us...for you?

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only son...* absolute, unconditional, eternal **and** sacrificial love.

To give a son is a sacrifice larger than we might think about on a regular day.

But to give up a loved one, so that others might thrive, is magnanimous – selfless.

Last month, when President Trump addressed Congress he invited Carryn Owens, the widow of Navy Seal William Ryan

Owens, to be present.

The assembled Congress and guests gave a prolonged standing ovation to the grieving woman and her fallen husband.

The cameras stayed fixed on Carryn's emotional face bearing witness to the pain associated with personal sacrifice.

Countless people, throughout history have given their sons and daughters, wives and husbands, mothers and fathers to causes perceived to be greater than oneself.

We honor these people and hold them in high regard.

When they are called to serve, they simply go.

They believe in what they are doing...they have faith.

All three of this week's readings embrace this idea of faith, asking what is it to believe?

Abram, believing God's promise, sets out from his home to a new land.

I am intrigued that Abram asked no questions.

God said 'Go' and Abram packed up his possessions, his wife and family and off they went.

Be able to trust God is evidence of this all-encompassing love.

To live with trust is liberating.

Without trust, we live in fear.

The Psalmist's words express deep faith and trust in God who protects and cares for God's people.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.*

These words of reassurance are repeated at bedsides and memorial services, at times when our troubles seem too large to bear alone.

This prayer testifies to that love so great that it can handle anything.

Nicodemus, coming to Jesus in the night, is invited to experience this love.

Jesus says that he must be born again, born from above, to  
access this wonder.

Nicodemus is confused. He has already been born, how can he  
be born again?

Nicodemus is caught in his own rigid idea of birth and faith.

He can't understand the possibility of new life.

He can't imagine seeing things from a different perspective.

What Nicodemus will come to understand is that faith is not just  
accepting ideas in the mind.

It is an experience of new birth, a transformation.

Faith is a matter of the heart.

A life of faith is a completely new way of being that enables us to  
know God in a relationship of trust and love.

Being 'born again' or 'born from above' or 'born of the spirit'  
means that you let God in.

Being born again is the turning from a self-centered life to a

God-centered life.

Whether that happens just once, or over a period of a lifetime, it is

the work of the holy spirit bringing God's grace into our lives.

You open your heart and your mind and you let God abide in you.

You let God's Holy Spirit breath life into your soul.

You are alive.

You are joyful.

I believe that this beloved passage provides us with three

important lessons.

The first is that God is ever creating. We have an opportunity to

be born again, and again and again.

God's grace is ongoing.

The second is that Jesus invites us to question our faith.

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asks.

Our faith journey is one of continually exploring God's power in

our lives.

We are reminded over and over again that our God is a God of wonder, greater than our imaginations can ever comprehend.

Why can't we rest in the questions? Why do we have to know?

There is something in the not knowing that comforts me.

When we feel that we need certainty in all of life, like Nicodemus, we will be sadly disappointed.

There is no such thing.

The third message is the promise of eternal life.

Our earthly journey is not the end of our relationship with God.

There is more.

When we "step out in faith" when we live our lives knowing that God loved us so much that he gave us the gift of his only son, then we know comfort.

Then we know love.

Then we know certainty.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

This is the promise of our faith. It is faith. It is hope. It is love. It is ours.

I'd like to close with a poem from Anita Weem's book *Kneeling in Jerusalem*:

*COME UNTO ME*

*When the journey gets too hard,*

*When we feel depleted,*

*When our compassion*

*turns to complaining,*

*when our efforts toward*

*justice and mercy*

*seem to get us nowhere,*

*it's time to remember*



*the humility part—  
that it is God who has made us  
and not we ourselves;  
that the saving of the world  
or even one part of it  
is not on our shoulders.  
It is then we can come unto him,  
And he will give us rest.  
With rest we'll remember  
What it is we are about.*

Let us pray.

O God, we pray this day:

For all who have a song they cannot sing,

For all who have a burden they cannot bear,

For all who live in chains they cannot break

For all who wander homeless and cannot return,

For those who are sick and for those who tend them,  
For those who wait for loved ones  
and wait in vain,  
for those who live in hunger  
and for those who will not share their bread,  
for those who are misunderstood  
and for those who misunderstand,  
for those who are captives and for those who are captors,  
for those whose words of love are locked within their hearts,  
and for those who yearn to hear those words.

Have mercy upon these, O God.

Have mercy upon us all.

Here now our silent prayers as we turn our hearts to you.

Amen.