



Sunday, March 10, 2024
John 3:14-21 (Fourth Sunday in Lent)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

I think it's safe to assume that for most of you, the second Sunday in March is one of your *least* favorite Sundays on the calendar. But...not because somehow for the past 5 years, *I've* been the one scheduled to preach – funny coincidence, huh? And since we know it's *not* because of *that*, then it must be because this is the day you resentfully lose a precious hour of sleep as Daylight Savings Time falls upon us.

But...*imbalanced preaching schedule* aside, I have to say, I don't actually mind Daylight Savings Time all that much because it also means that we're one day closer to the end of winter. And lately I've been appreciating all the glimpses of Spring – from thunderstorms and refreshing rains to the sights and sounds of birds, along with the increasing warmth we've been gifted with each sunny day.

And yet, at the same time I find myself not enjoying the signs of Spring as much as I'd like because, well... because I'm just so tired of all the battles that keep taking place around me.

From the 2-year war between Ukraine and Russia to the ongoing tension and deadly conflict taking place in Gaza – it just wears on me. Then there's the political battles taking place in our own country between parties and presidential candidates as well as between family members, neighbors, friends, and even strangers. Oh, and how could I forget all the battles family and friends and even some of you are going through with addiction, faith, grieving, illness, loneliness, and relationships.

And so, because of the sheer volume of it all I've been noticing more and more that my entire being is hungry. But it's *not* a hunger for food. It's a deep hunger within my very spirit. And my entire being is increasingly hungry and yearns for peace – for me...for you...and for the world.

I hunger for care and compassion to overwhelm anger, violence, and division. I hunger for equality and an end to racism, sexism and every other form of discrimination that marginalizes people and diminishes their dignity and quality of life. I hunger to see an end to poverty, homelessness, addiction, injustice, sickness, pain, sadness, grieving, and all the things that don't fall into the category I think of when Jesus says, "*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*"

The context for today's gospel reading is the story of Nicodemus, a man who comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness, and *he is hungry*. He comes to Jesus during the night, and he has a deep spiritual hunger that's gnawing away at him. He has a hunger deep within, a hunger that he can't fully identify. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, so he comes during the night when he won't be seen. Yet, he comes wanting to find out more about this person called Jesus and what he's teaching.

Nicodemus is spiritually hungry, but he doesn't understand the things Jesus tells him, so Jesus turns to a strange Old Testament story to make his point. And being the good Pharisee that he was, this old story would have been familiar to him.

Jesus reminds him of the Israelites who, during their forty-year wilderness wanderings, had sinned. And after wandering in the wilderness for so long, after *they too* had at times experienced hunger, their seemingly endless journey was leading to significant conflict within the community. The Israelites grumbled about Moses and grumbled about God, and they faced punishment...and part of that punishment was being bitten by deadly snakes.

So, the Israelites then cried out to God for deliverance and God used the strangest thing to save them. Moses formed a bronze serpent, mounted it on a pole, and when the Israelites looked at it, they were healed; they were saved from the death that resulted from the poisonous snakebites. As strange as it seems to us, the Israelites were instructed to look at this bizarre symbol of redemption to be relieved of the suffering they had brought upon themselves by their rebellion against God.

And so, as Jesus talks with Nicodemus, he connects this strange story to himself. He draws an analogy between the "lifting up" of the Son of Man, and Moses "lifting up" the bronze serpent in the wilderness. Jesus says that, in a similar manner, the Son of Man must be "lifted up" so that "whoever believes in him may have eternal life."



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And as he attempts to feed the persistent hunger within the heart of Nicodemus, Jesus speaks words that have become one of the best-known, best-loved verses in all of scripture – John 3:16. *“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.”*

“For God so loved the world....” For God so loved the world? When I think of the world, I see a small planet in the vastness of space. And this insignificant, miniscule dot of a planet that is our world is so deeply and tragically broken.

On this planet, millions of people have died from a relatively recent pandemic. Racism plagues the fabric of our society and is present in every institutional structure. White supremacy groups, hate groups, and militias are growing and becoming more prevalent and destructive in our culture. The spread of domestic terrorism and the horrific acts these groups commit create increasing fear and negative responses throughout our country.

Around the world, more children are dying of diarrhea and infectious diseases than those who die of malaria and HIV/Aids combined. One in five children around the world don't have access to life saving vaccines and they consequently die. In sub-Saharan Africa, 7 out of 10 people lack access to electricity – the key factor that imprisons them in extreme poverty. Economic injustice is growing both here and abroad. And what human beings have done to bring destruction to this planet we call home is mind boggling and depressing. Yes, the world is so very hungry! *Yet, God so loved the world?*

Yes! Yes! God so loves this world! And, in the gospel of John the word for “world” refers to the cosmos – to everything! God so loves everything – the entire cosmos, the entire creation, this little, insignificant, miniscule planet that's barely even a speck in the vastness of space – all the people, the land and the oceans, the animals, the bugs, the world's goodness, and even those that influence its evil.

In the person of Jesus, God embraces it all and takes it into God's very self – even the profound brokenness of this world. The gospel of John tells us that God loves the entire creation *so much* that the entire creation can find its home in God. God so loves the world with an immense, redeeming love that disturbs us, pulls at our hearts, creates within us a hunger for God, unsettles us, grasps us, and draws us into the very arms of God's love where we become forever changed and transformed.

And once we've been seized by this love, we find that it's a love that will **never, ever** let us go. When that happens, we discover that our true home, the home of all creation, is truly in God. Yes, God so loves the world, and it's in turning ourselves toward Jesus and looking to the cross where we finally find the love and grace that fills the yearning hunger in our hearts. And it's there that we discover the beloved One whom God gave to the world out of love for the cosmos.

There we begin to know the depth of God's redeeming love for God's people. *There* we find the One who takes into God's very self not only all of the wonder, goodness, and beauty of creation but also all of the brokenness and pain of this world. That's the way of Jesus. That's the message of the cross. And it's God's redeeming love that changes us and causes us to then respond to the needs of the world. When God's redeeming love fills our hungry souls, we are then compelled to work for peace, equity, reconciliation, and justice in this broken world.

In the early days of Jesus' ministry, Nicodemus came by night and had a longing hunger within himself. He came to Jesus, seeking to fill a hunger he didn't really understand. Nicodemus was invited into the way of Jesus. He was invited into the love *God has for the world*, and he didn't initially understand what Jesus was saying. However, he grew in understanding and was transformed because, when we get to the end of John's gospel, we find out Nicodemus didn't abandon Jesus.

My friends, as we gather together this morning, and as we share the gifts of bread and wine, we too receive the very life of God that fills the nagging hunger we feel within our hearts.

In Jesus, the one who died on the cross, God has shown us the greatest love the world has ever seen. And every time we gather and feast at God's holy table, we are nourished once again by the love God has for this *entire world* – a love that holds each and every one of us. **A love that will never, ever let us go!** Thanks be to God. Amen!