

4th Sunday of Lent

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

March 14, 2021

The last time I preached on a Sunday four weeks ago, you may remember that I spoke about our camping honeymoon: I've subsequently heard it referred to as the "little bitty tent" homily. Well, I'm going to talk about family again, but about an event that occurred almost 25 years later. At that time, our youngest son, Mark, was just entering high school and he had reached those hormonal teenage years when girls began to look a lot better, a whole lot better, than the classroom. Academics were the farthest thing from his mind during the first semester of his freshman year when he earned a not-so-stellar 2.3 grade point average; Mark was, shall we say, **in the dark**.

In our infinite wisdom as parents, we spoke with Mark about better applying himself in the classroom. I suspect that, to Mark's ears, we sounded like all adults in the Charlie Brown holiday television specials: WAH-WAH-WAH-WAH-WAH!

However, beginning in Mark's second semester and continuing on throughout the rest of his academic career, he showed marked improvement (pun intended!!!) and ended-up graduating both high school and college with honors! After his second semester turn-around, when I asked Mark what he did differently, he replied "It's simple: I just went to class, listened to the teacher and did my homework!" Mark **saw the light!**

Light and darkness are dualistic concepts in the Gospel according to John. Word pairs in John's Gospel, as examples of the contrast between "light and darkness," include:

- Day and night
- Sight and blindness
- Known and unknown
- Spirit and the flesh
- Heavenly and earthly.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is in dialogue with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish high council. Their discussion takes place "at night," which signified Nicodemus' spiritual darkness in which man lives apart from God. Such darkness, spiritual and physical, is what all the people of Judah endured during the Babylonian captivity described in today's first reading from the Book of Chronicles. That darkness was caused by the people's infidelity, "practicing all the abominations of the nations," and rejecting the word of God as relayed through his prophets.

Early in this dialogue, Jesus utters one of the most-often quoted verses in the bible. If you've ever watched a sporting event, I'm sure you've seen the man who strategically places himself in the background of the most prominent camera angle, whether it's behind home plate at a baseball game, or in the end zone of a football game. This man, commonly known as "rainbow man" for the multi-colored wig that he wore, is holding a placard that reads "JOHN 3:16:" "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life."

That verse is a beautiful summary at the heart of our salvation. In the Introduction to his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)*, Pope Benedict XVI had this to say regarding John 3:16:

We have come to believe in God's love: In these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.

That encounter, experienced by Nicodemus in today's gospel, is also an appropriate description for us during this season of Lent: **A transforming encounter with a person, the Son of God, who gives us life, direction and purpose.**

Jesus' discourse in today's gospel presents Nicodemus with a direction for his life: Will he follow Jesus or will he not? However, this gospel passage doesn't describe Nicodemus's reaction to Jesus' discourse; the cautious, nighttime visitor seems to have silently disappeared back into the night. Maybe John didn't immediately reveal Nicodemus's response because Nicodemus is a metaphor for each of us. We've met Jesus; we've heard his words, most of us throughout our lives. How will we respond? Will we return to the shadows of night and darkness or move toward Jesus, the Light?

Later in John's gospel, we hear more of Nicodemus. He came to Jesus' defense before his fellow Pharisees (John 7:50-52) and assisted Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus (John 19:39). It seems that Nicodemus eventually came out of the darkness and "live[d] the truth." He turned toward the Light and through his works revealed himself as a disciple of the Son of Man who had been lifted up "so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

On this Laetere Sunday, marking the halfway point of Lent, let us recommit ourselves through our prayer, fasting and almsgiving to enter the Light and embrace God's gift of eternal life, just like Nicodemus.