

## Lent: Invitation into God's Life and Love

A sermon on Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 and John 3:1-17

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

We are now a week and a half into Lent on the church's calendar. Maybe that means something to you, maybe it doesn't. Maybe it means that the paraments are purple again, or that we're not supposed to be alleluia, or maybe that Easter is coming. For a lot of people Lent is a period of time in which they fast, or otherwise give something up, or maybe they take on something new. Have you ever wondered why? It's kind of a strange thing. If you give up something harmless that you enjoy, it can seem like you are trying to punish yourself. If you are trying to give up something of a bad habit, well, then it seems rather self-serving.



Quite often Paul's letter to the Romans that was read this morning gets read with that sort of a what-you-do-doesn't-matter attitude. And if you read Romans looking for it, it would seem to say that faith alone is what matters before God.

But if you put that aside just a moment, what Paul is saying is even more incredible. He's saying that grace is a *gift*. That you do not *earn* it. God's opinion of you is not determined by your worthiness or by doing the right things. Imagine for a moment that was how God chose to deal with us. That might not end too well for us, but think about what that would mean for God. It would mean that we were in control of God. So long as we do X, Y, and Z, God would be powerless to refuse us our due. I think I may have mentioned before that I have one professor who keeps warning us that if at anytime People come across looking better than God, that something might be wrong with your theology. I think it is a useful reminder here, that if God is seeming weaker than his creation, you might need to rethink things. Paul puts things straight for us. You cannot control God. You cannot trick God. What you can do is **trust** God.

## Intent: Invitation into God's Life and Love



That is what faith in this context means - not believing a certain set of doctrines, but in trusting that the God those doctrines describe loves and forgives you, unconditionally.

Both this reading from Romans and the Gospel lesson I am about to get to are about "Justification" - which is something of a technical term theologians use, and yet often can't agree on exactly what it means. Generally, Justification is being made right with God. It usually refers to the movement of a person away from their favorite sins towards what they now hold to be better, that is, Life in alignment with God's will.

Justification is often something that happens repeatedly throughout a person's life.

Nicodemus, by all accounts was a faithful man, a good Jew. A pharisee, a rule-follower. And he suspected that Jesus was not just any teacher. When he greets Jesus, he doesn't ask anything in particular, but it seems that he wants to have some good theological conversation. And yet the conversation Jesus chooses to have with him is about being "reborn." That should seem a little weird. Birth is very much at the beginning of things, surely Nicodemus is more advanced than that! Next to a lot of other folk - Nicodemus is not a great sinner who has great need of repentance. Unless of course Jesus knew something Nicodemus' neighbors didn't - who knows?

Jesus spoke to him of a spiritual sort of rebirth. A birth of water and the spirit. Water, being symbolic of spiritual purification, was used for baptism of pagan converts to Judaism as well as in purification rites of sinners. (Nicodemus might have been offended that he would have need of such purifying). As for spirit, Jesus reminds us that we don't understand the workings of the Spirit any more than we understand the wind - which is the same word in the Greek John is writing in.

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Nicodemus has trouble with all this, and who can really blame him? Well, okay, Jesus does - he chides Nicodemus for being a teacher without understanding. He asks him how he expects to understand heavenly things when he can't understand the earthly things in front of him.

This is actually echoed throughout writings from early Christian monks living in the desert. Evagrius was one of these monks who worked out just what it was to live as a Christian monk. He was always very careful not to teach beyond his audience's spiritual maturity. The theoretical and mystical material was reserved for only those who were ready for it after years working with more practical matters, especially self-mastery - working to withstand various forms of temptation. But of course, even once someone had arrived at the point where they were not ruled by their emotions or their inner demons and could then advance on to deeper experience of God, they still had to contend with their demons and stay mindful of their thoughts and emotions.

It seems that Jesus is telling Nicodemus, and us, something very similar. Those beginning steps are important and need to be repeated continually. Everyday is day one. Every day you have to make the decision to live for God. Some days that may come easily, others more difficult. It really is one of those lessons in not being governed by thoughts and emotions that shift from day to day, but by a larger unchanging truth.

This, I think, is what Lent is about - together with the focus on giving things up. It is a season to refocus our lives around God, a season to practice living more deeply into our faith, a season to be reborn again. A rebirth into life in Christ, into right relationship with God, a rebirth that cannot be earned, but it can be participated in. It is not ours by right, but because God promised, and God is to be trusted.

The last few lines of the Gospel reading tell us this very clearly:

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For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that every one who believes in him may have eternal life. He did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that through him, the world might be saved.

It is not about judgement, or punishment. It is about God's Love.

*Now to the One  
who by the power at work within us  
is able to do far more abundantly  
than all we can ask or imagine,  
to God be glory in the church  
and in Christ Jesus  
to all generations, forever and ever.  
Amen.*