**John, The Eagle… and Lent**

**Frank Castellon; St. Thomas Episcopal Church**

**March 8th, 2020**

Dear Gracious and Loving God, we pray that we hear what you need for us to hear.

Yesterday was a glorious day in the kingdom of God. Jennifer Lazzuri was ordained into the Sacred Order of Deacons in the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

The order of Deacons is an order of servanthood. Their job is to lead, enable and encourage others in charitable service. They model Jesus, who came to serve and not to be served. It is not coincidence that all priests and bishops must first become deacons; and once a deacon, always a deacon… always a servant.

In the brief time that I have known Jennifer, I find that the pattern of her life, before she was even ordained a deacon, already fit the pattern of service. Yes, it was a glorious day yesterday. It is a glorious day now. It is good for us to welcome Jennifer to our home… and to follow her example.

And now, we need to talk about today.

I once was asked which was my favorite Gospel. My answer was and is, the Gospel of John. Another time I was asked what is my favorite book of the bible. And my answer was, and is, the Gospel of John.

The gospel writers are represented in symbol by the figures of the four beasts that the writer of the Revelation saw around the throne.

Most commonly, the *man* stands for Mark, which is the plainest and most straight forward, and the most human of the gospels.

The *lion* stands for Matthew, for he specially saw Jesus as the Messiah, the Lion of Judah, the king of kings.

The *ox* stands for Luke, because it is the animal of service and sacrifice, and Luke presented Jesus, as the servant who sacrificed so that we would be made free.

And the *eagle* stands for John. The eagle flies high and her eyes can see clearly what others cannot even begin to discern. John has the most discerning and penetrating view of the eternal mysteries that surround our human perception of God… In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God, and the word was God…

I find myself closer to God and to Jesus in John than in any other book of the bible.

Lent is the time when we are asked to spend 40 days seeking to strengthen our spiritual being. Most of us will observe Lent by perhaps giving up something that we hate to give up, or by taking up something that we really do not like to do, as a sacrificial gift. But, the better use of Lent for me, is to spend more time in thought and prayer about my relationship with God and my neighbors.

That is why, I find the reading from John today and for the next three Sundays, particularly meaningful.

Next week we will meet the Samaritan woman at the well… who was thirsty and received living water.

The week after that, we will meet the blind man who after receiving sight… truly saw.

And finally, we will meet Lazarus, who was dead… and yet he lived.

But today, we meet Nicodemus, the pharisee that came by night… because he was curious.

Nicodemus must have been wealthy. When Jesus died, He brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pound weight[[1]](#footnote-1), and only a wealthy person could afford that.

Nicodemus was a pharisee. To be a pharisee, you had to be elected into the brotherhood; and you had to pledge that you would spend your whole life observing every detail of the law.

The law was the word of God as given to Moses. It contained every thing needed to live a good life… what to eat… how to conduct business… how to do anything and everything so that it was godly.

By the time we meet Nicodemus, and the pharisees, the ten commandments given to Moses, had grown into thousands of maxims that were written in the 24 chapters of the Mishnah, and in the voluminous almud. For example, the section that explained what one could do, or not do, on the sabbath was contained in over 100 pages.

Nicodemus was one of the rulers of the Jews. He was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin consisted of 70 members and was the supreme court of the Jews. Later in John[[2]](#footnote-2), we read that when the Pharisees were conspiring in the Sanhdrin to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus said “our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?”

That Nicodemus, the wealthy pharisee and ruler of Israel came to see Jesus…

It is night. People are home, preparing to sleep. And here is this doctor of divinity, who has studied a lot, but seems to still need more... walking the lonely streets of Jerusalem, seeking a young person, that seems to be filled with the spirit he thirsts for; and who talks with the power to attract multitudes.

Like Abram and Sarai in the Genesis story we also read, he does not seem to have a plan of action… He knows where Jesus is staying, physically, and goes there seeking… seeking what he does not seem to have. Perhaps he is spiritually thirsty… I have been there…

When he finally meets Jesus, he does not really know what to ask… he does not start the conversation with a question. He starts with an observation… “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher that has come from God, for no one can do the things that you do without the presence of God”… and then he is silent… waiting, for what?

Jesus’ response is not simple. ”Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above… no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the spirit… the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes”.

Nicodemus responds “How can these things be?” He is really saying “I am confused… I don’t understand”… and Jesus answered him “ Are you a teacher of Israel and you do not understand these things?”

I sympathize with Nicodemus. I have been like Nicodemus… curious… and yet confused with the apparent answer.

When you follow your curiosity, sometimes you find yourself walking on thin air. Confusion is the unintended consequence. When you are confused, don’t top there… try to look beyond the surface. Let’s try to think of the subtle nuances in this discourse by the young rabbi.

Think of it. If you are to be born again, you are to grow up again. Think of your life. What would you do different if you had half the chance? What would you change, if you could alter this occasion… or that one?

As we enter more deeply into this puzzle with Nicodemus, are we finding that what Jesus is really inviting us to do, is to re-examine our lives... to conduct an autopsy of our past… but look to our future with redemptive possibilities.

Jesus seems to be saying that, it is not the signs and the wonders that he has done that are really important. The important thing was the symbolic change that could occur in a person’s heart in response. And that change is such that it could only be described as a new birth… a new birth that came from water and the spirit…

Symbols must not be taken as the reality that they are supposed to represent. The ashes and abstinence of Lent mean nothing if they do not authentically represent a rebirth, a refreshing, of our spiritual being.

Water and the spirit are symbolic of baptism. Baptism makes known that all of us are children of God. In front of family and friends, we are marked by the Holy Spirit as Christ’ own forever.

Jesus says “Unless one is born of water and the spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God “.

We, you and I have been born of water and the spirit. We were baptized. into the kingdom of God, which is here and now, within and without. We have been given access to the Holy Spirit as a free gift, a grace bestowed upon us; and in payment for that gift, we are only asked to try to respond to the call that each of us will receive from that Spirit… like Jennifer did yesterday.

Two thousand years later, we begin to understand what Nicodemus tried to understand. We each are called. The Spirit is working in the hearts of each of us in ways that are beyond our knowledge and understanding… like the motions of the wind…

I do not care what your station in life is… you can be going to school… or working in your chosen profession… or being a stay-home mother or father… or you can be an ordained minister… or a politician… or a member of one religious affiliation or another… or be an agnostic or an atheist…or whatever.

Whoever you are, wherever you are in your life, the call is the same… and it is exemplified by the five promises we make at baptism:

* to continue in the Apostle’s teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers;
* to persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fall into sin, to repent and return to the Lord;
* to proclaim by word and example the Good news of God in Christ;
* to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself; and
* to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

It is not an easy call.

Abram and Sarai and Nicodemus are symbols of those of us who have enough faith to begin. And to begin is the essential element of a living relationship with God. Paul reminds us that enough faith to begin is counted as righteousness in the kingdom.

Now, I have another question. We know why Nicodemus wanted to meet Jesus; but why would Jesus want to meet with Nicodemus?

Wasn’t Nicodemus a wealthy and very important pharisee? The same pharisees that Jesus was calling hypocrites. The people He denounced as self-righteous. The people who called others to follow a multitude or ritualistic concepts that they themselves did not follow. The pharisees that Jesus knew attacked him for breaking the sabbath… consorting with sinners… and worse yet, forgiving sins. The same people who were plotting to kill him.

Why would Jesus meet with Nicodemus? I do not really know the answer.

Other than I know that Jesus will meet anyone half-way. Even a pharisee… even you and me.

This is Lent… It is evening… Jesus is sitting there by the light of the lamp… He is looking at us with loving eyes… waiting… always waiting…

Amen

**Children’s Sermon**

**March 8th, 2020**

**St Thomas Episcopal Church**

The Bible is a very big book…

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is the bible that the Episcopal Church uses.

* Has the imprimatur of the American and Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
* Blessed by leader of the Greek Orthodox Church
* Thirty-two other protestant churches use it also.
* It was published in 1989
* Contains all of the Apocryphal books from the Roman Catholic Canonicalorder.
* It has 1189 Chapters; 929 Chapters in the Old Testament and 260 Chapters in the New Testament
* What is the middle chapter? Psalm 107
* What is the shortest verse? John 11:35 “ Jesus wept”

If you were asked to tell me what the bible says in a nutshell, by quoting a verse, which verse would it be?

* Most people probably would quote one of the verses we read today in the gospel
* It is one pf its most famous verses…
* John 3:16

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

* Who is this verse about? God
* What does God do? He Loves
* Who does God love? The world… you and me…
* What did God do to show you his love? He gave us His son
* What must we do in return? Believe that Jesus is His son
* Do we get a reward? Eternal Life…

And you will spend the rest of your lives, learning what that is

Now, let’s say it together…

1. John 19:39 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John 7:50 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)