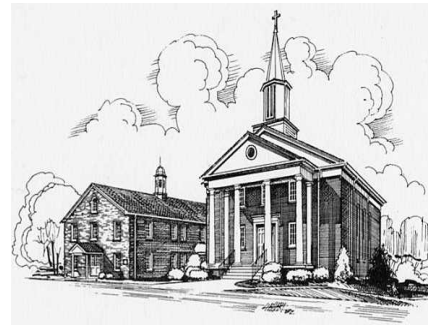


*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*

**Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**Year B**

**RCL**



Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

John 3:14-21

**The Collect**

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

**Numbers 21:4-9**

From Mount Hor the Israelites set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

**Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 Page 746, BCP**

*Confitemini Domino*

- 1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, and his mercy endures for ever.
- 2 Let all those whom the LORD has redeemed proclaim that he redeemed them from the hand of the foe.
- 3 He gathered them out of the lands; from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.
- 17 Some were fools and took to rebellious ways; they were afflicted because of their sins.
- 18 They abhorred all manner of food and drew near to death's door.
- 19 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.
- 20 He sent forth his word and healed them and saved them from the grave.
- 21 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his mercy and the wonders he does for his children.

22 Let them offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving and tell  
of his acts with shouts of joy.

### John 3:14-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“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.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”



## SERMON

I thought, in lieu of a sermon, we'd start a book club this Sunday. I'll read classic books to you, and then we can discuss them. I picked two books today, "Moby Dick: the Whale" by Herman Melville, and "Crime and Punishment" by the great Russian writer. Fyodor Dostoevsky. Let's start with Moby Dick.

[Read first passage from Moby Dick]

OK...after that, a lot of stuff happens to him. There's a big whale, and a captain who's mad at the whale because it bit his leg off, and it's real exciting. The book ends this way...[Read last part]. Great book. Hope you enjoyed it. Our thought for the day from Moby Dick is that he who seeks revenge must begin by swallowing his own knife. You might want to take a note and put it on the refrigerator.

All righty then. We don't have much time, so now

let's read "Crime and Punishment". (Forgive me, but I'll read it in translation for those of us whose Russian may not be up to snuff.)

[Read first few paragraphs of Crime and Punishment]

See, the thing is about the lodger, whose name is Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, is that he commits not one murder, but two. With an ax, yet. then a lot happens to him and he has trouble living with his guilt, and drives himself nuts, then he confesses and feels better. It's really very interesting. Then, at the last...

[Read the last part]

Our thought for the day from this book is that confession is good for the soul. You'll probably want to put that on the refrigerator, too.

Is anybody here pleased with my little book club? I thought that it might be familiar to you, because this is



often the way we read Scripture. In place of being swept up in the stories of Scripture the way we are swept up in a movie or a TV show, we read a small part of a big story, then hope to reduce it to a verse to live by, or a point we can use to argue with others that our understanding exceeds theirs.

We wouldn't think of treating great literature that way. Why in the world do we treat Scripture in that fashion? Part of the blame rests with the Revised Common Lectionary, which subdivides Scripture into easily digested fiddly bits. Today's selection is one of those fiddly bits. The story really begins at verse 1 with the riveting account of a clandestine visit by night and a dialog between Jesus and Nicodemus, then ends with a discourse. All we get is the discourse without a word about why Jesus would be saying these things. That won't do, church. What if you read Dostoevsky's great

work and tried to reduce it to:

Rodion Raskolnikov took an ax  
And gave the pawnbroker 40 whacks.  
And when the job was nicely done,  
He gave her sister 41.

What kind of grade would you get in Russian Lit  
101 with that sort of understanding?

If we are to get anything but confused from Scripture, we have to walk the narrative with the participants and let the story work changes in us. That's what stories do – they work changes in us. Generally, we don't read Bible stories that way. We read fiddly bits. No one has ever been changed for the better by a fiddly bit. It is the difference between crying your way through that last scene in "Old Yeller" and reading a newspaper headline reporting, "Boy Shoots Rabid Dog".

If we are to open ourselves to this story, we have to squint through the haze of history to see a crooked street

in the poor quarter of Jerusalem. Darkness filled the small street like an obscuring cloud. In the occasional glimmer of a dying cooking fire or oil lamp, it was just possible to make out a figure, feeling his way along the unfamiliar street.

The figure was similarly obscured, wrapped in a dark cloak. By the figure's manner, it was clearly a man. By his furtive glances behind him, he was clearly fearful. At other times, and in other, more prosperous streets, passersby might greet Nicodemus, leader of the Pharisees, and he might return the greeting, but on this street, at this time of night, Nicodemus wrapped his dark cloak tighter about himself.

Nicodemus' mind oscillated between the speech he had prepared for his meeting with the man who was staying in this street, and thoughts of dread if his mission should come to the attention of the Romans or the

Sadducees. The matter was a delicate one, calling for the greatest discretion. The Romans were everywhere, and those in their pay were even more numerous. For the hundredth time, Nicodemus checked behind him to make sure he was not being followed.

If Nicodemus were to be seen under circumstances indicating that the Pharisees were forming an alliance with this Jesus, word of it would take fire and spread like oil through the city. That is why Nicodemus was chosen for this secret mission. Nicodemus maintained good relations with the Romans. If he were seen out at night, he could easily explain himself. Additionally, he was the most scholarly of the Pharisees. If anyone could uncover fraud and deception by this Jesus, it would be him, and then the matter could be left to the Romans with no danger to the Pharisees or the people generally.

Nicodemus did not think he would find fraud,

though. The signs the man had performed had been testified to by many, many people. The Pharisees were almost universally agreed that he was a prophet sent from God. The only questions were, “What is his message? What word does he bring to God’s suffering people? Will he bring down fire from heaven and destroy the Romans?”

Nicodemus could hear his heart beating and his breath rasping as he could just make out the house ahead through the gloom. With a final look behind, he stepped quickly to the outer gate and slipped into the garden. The man he had come to see was seated under a tree, patiently waiting.

Nicodemus made a respectful bow and began the speech he had memorized, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of

God.”

To his surprise and irritation, Jesus interrupted him. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born *anōthen*.”

Nicodemus felt his cheeks redden. He was not accustomed to being interrupted. When he spoke, he expected others to listen. Particularly was he not accustomed to be interrupted in this way. The words of this Jesus were soft, but the message he presented made no sense to him. Nicodemus hadn’t said anything about a kingdom of God and wasn’t sure what this man meant by that. He was equally puzzled by the word Jesus had spoken, *anōthen*, which can mean born from above or born again. Or both. Which meaning did he intend? Nicodemus assumed he meant “born anew”, which made no sense. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the

mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born *anōthen*.' 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. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus' brow furrowed as he struggled with Jesus' words. He had not put himself at peril, coming here at night, to hear nonsense, and what did this man mean by saying he knew as little of these things as he knew of the place from which the winds blew? "How can these things be?" he sputtered.

Jesus answered him in surprise, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

Nicodemus' cheeks burned. He was the leader of the Pharisees, and he should be addressed as such. He did not come here to be lectured by this ... this ... Galilean.

“Very truly, I tell you, what we know we say and testify to what we have seen.” Incredulously, Nicodemus heard his own words, his polite greeting to the man, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher...” echoed back to him in condemnation. Nicodemus’ cheeks burned hotter.

Jesus continued, “Yet you and your people do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”

Nicodemus fidgeted. The words he was hearing made him still more uncomfortable. To hear this man speak, you could almost imagine that he thought he was



the Son of Man, of whom Daniel had spoken.

Jesus continued. “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Now, Nicodemus was alarmed. This Jesus now clearly spoke of himself as something more than a prophet. Nicodemus knew the Law and the Prophets. You could search them as carefully as you liked and see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee. Yet, here was this Galilean speaking of the Son of Man being lifted up. Daniel said nothing about this. Where does this Galilean get the authority to add to Scripture?

Jesus reached out a hand to Nicodemus and touched him lightly on the sleeve. “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. Indeed,

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Nicodemus made his way home by the light of a half moon which had risen while they spoke. It cast faint shadows on his path which matched the half shadows in his mind. Who is this Galilean who speaks with such authority? What makes him think he can alter Scripture or speak of himself in so unseemly a fashion? And if he is a prophet, what is his message?

Sleep did not come quickly to Nicodemus that night, nor for many nights to come.

Each of you here is committed to your church. You wouldn't be here if you weren't. I wonder, however, if, when you approach Bible study, do you do it humbly in a way that leaves you open to the narrative, or do you, like Nicodemus, approach the stories of our Lord pride-

fully by first saying, “We know...” ?

Anthony De Mello, a Jesuit priest, addressed those who refuse to open themselves to the power of the story

1

“You listen, not to discover, but to find something that confirms your own thoughts. You argue, not to find the truth, but to vindicate your thinking.”

Forget the fiddly bits. Open yourself to the narrative, church, for the narrative will work changes in you.

AMEN

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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1 Anthony De Mello, “Awakening: Conversations with the Master”

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