

The gospel we hear this morning, the one that begins with Jesus using the image of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness, is actually near the end of a very interesting conversation Jesus has with Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee who has heard about Jesus and comes to him under cover of darkness to ask about the signs Jesus is doing. If you remember, this is when Jesus talks about being born from above and Nicodemus, quite obtusely, asks how one can reenter the womb to be born again. Obviously, not what Jesus is getting at.

Jesus is talking about entering the kingdom of God, about being born with water and the holy spirit, actually all images associated with Christian baptism. Now, in today's gospel, Jesus uses the image of serpent raised high to evoke the image of Jesus lifted up on the cross, and raised to new life. And like the serpent in the wilderness and Jesus on the cross on Calvary which leads to the empty tomb, we are reminded that God has a plan. God has always had a plan. God's plan is for the salvation of the world.

"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." Nicodemus does not yet believe, but by the end of the gospel will see his fierce belief played out very bravely. Which is key to our understanding of belief. Belief is not a feeling. Belief is an action word. Much like love is an action word. Those who believe in Jesus act in a certain way. For us, this action is grounded in our baptismal vows.

Jesus comes into the world, not to condemn the world, but so that the world may believe, come to know God through him, and enter fully into God's plan for the salvation of the world. Because the world, from almost the very beginning, has surely needed saving.

While Jesus states clearly, he has not come to condemn the world, there is still judgment. But here, judgment is not about the balancing of scales. It is more akin to "crisis;" and we all know that in life a crisis most often forces a choice. "And this is the *crisis*, that the light (Jesus) has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil."

Here is the clear contrast of life in the world versus life in God's kingdom. It is through Jesus coming into the world, that we, and so many, are faced with a choice about how we are to live. The Israelites were faced with that choice in the wilderness, and only needed to look at Moses' serpent, the one provided by God, to live. Now we need only to look upon Jesus, to believe (that action word), to choose his way, to be saved, to live.

We can love the ways of the world, making them idols in our lives, or we can follow Jesus into the light, embrace the kingdom God has made for us, and claim the gift of eternal life with God at the center that is won for us in through the empty tomb.

This choice is none other than the way of love. It is embodied in justice, peace, and unconditional love of our neighbors (those we know and those we don't) no matter how alike or different from us they are.

Jesus has come into the world to save the world. Like the Israelites we can grumble about what Jesus calls us to do, which is just as hard as wandering aimlessly in the desert for forty years, or we can take up our own cross of discipleship now, live into our baptismal covenant now, embrace Jesus' greatest commandment to love God with all our hearts, mind, soul, strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves as our own way of life. Jesus has come into the world – and so now we have a choice.

May we use the rest of this season of Lent to make, to solidify, our choice, not alone, never alone, but always with God's help.