March 15, 2015 Come to the Light A Lenten Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett

THE OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS

The Old Testament Witness for today is from the Book of Numbers, which is the fourth book in the Old Testament. Numbers 21:4-9 .

This is one of the many stories of the Israelites’ despair in the wilderness after God helped them escape from slavery in Egypt under Moses’ leadership.

THE GOSPEL WITNESS

The Gospel Witness for today is John 3:14-21, which is printed on the back page of Today’s Readings.

Today’s gospel reading refers to the bronze serpent set on a pole in the Old Testament Witness this morning, except that the Son of Man’s being lifted up brings eternal life to all who believe.

The Son of Man or Son of God is Jesus, who is “lifted up” on the cross.

Today’s reading includes one of the most memorized verses of the Bible, John 3:16.

SERMON

The Gospel of John was written down some 100 years after the resurrection of Jesus. The author shows us a different side of Jesus. Instead of teaching with memorable stories called parables, in John’s Gospel, Jesus makes long and involved theological statements that are at times rather poetic.

These theological statements, called discourses, are closer in style to the letters of St Paul than they are to what Jesus says in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

For example, the Gospel Witness for today, John 3:14-21, is a fairly brief discourse of Jesus, in which Jesus explains who he is and what he is about to Nicodemus, a wealthy Jewish leader.

Nicodemus eventually becomes a secret follower of Jesus and later provides the expensive spices, myrrh and aloes, for Jesus’ burial.

Because Jesus is speaking to a Jew, Jesus begins the discourse with a reference from the Hebrew scriptures about a bronze serpent, raised on a pole, bringing life out of death for those who believe that God is with them in the wilderness.

Jesus says, “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.”

Jesus is claiming to be part of the tradition, the Mosaic tradition, which gives credibility to Jesus teachings and his being.

Some called Jesus blasphemous for saying that he is the son of God, and in fact the only son of God, through whom God will save all who believe in him.

And that Jesus makes no mention of Jewish religious law, not even the Ten Commandments, makes Jesus even more suspect.

Jesus is blasphemous to some people and divine to others. It depends on how open you are to Jesus’ teaching that “The Kingdom of God is at hand,” and that he himself (Jesus) is the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies of the Holy Scriptures.

While Jesus does not use a parable to make his point to Nicodemus, Jesus does use a metaphor that we all can understand: light. And in the days before electricity, light was surely an even more powerful metaphor than it is to us today. Darkness could be dangerous, representing the unseen and the unknown. Darkness could be frightening. Darkness could be death.

People in Jesus’ time may well have been more happy to greet the dawn then we tend to be, even with daylight saving time making the dawn an hour later.

Jesus says that God’s judgment is that “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.”

And just what is this “light” that Jesus is talking about? The more accurate English translation of Jesus’ word “light” from the Greek is “radiance,” which means “vividly bright or shining, glowing,

expressive of love, confidence or happiness.”

And if we go to the first chapter of the Gospel of John, the Prologue, we learn “light’s” deeper theological meaning.

John 1:9-13 --- “The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”

And then in John 8:12 Jesus claims his identity:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but have the light of life.” (repeat)

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but have the light of life.”

Whenever we find ourselves in a dark place, when our problems seem insurmountable, and we don’t know where to turn or what to do, Jesus is inviting us to leave the darkness and come to the light, to come to him, to come to him and walk with him, in the light, the light of life.

How do we come to the light? There are many ways to come to the light --- through prayer, through study and through service for example.

But I have a particular suggestion that may be of interest to you. My suggestions is to light a single candle in a darkened room, and look quietly into its light, into its radiance and then note how the light illuminates what had not been visible earlier.

Could this means that all will be visible someday?

Then, as we look further at the candle giving light in the darkness, we could recall the teachings of Jesus, maybe particularly the Beatitudes or “Blesseds,” perhaps the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, or you could think of his encouragement to the woman taken in adultery, and his words encouraging us to love one another, as in “I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

We could remember how Jesus throws the money changers and sellers of animals out of the Temple in Jerusalem, and how he says at the Last Supper, “Do this in remembrance of me” and “One of you will betray me.”

Or we could think of last Jesus’ words from the cross, the miracle of the empty tomb on Easter morning and his cooking fish and inviting us to, “Come and have breakfast,” in one of his post-resurrection appearances in the Gospel of John.

In other words, we can come to the light, come to Jesus, come to the light of our Lord, literally, by lighting a candle in the darkness and calling to mind what is most important to me about him.

And then after pondering our Lord, we could switch focus and think about ourselves and our issues. What is on my heart and mind right now? And thirdly, we could think about how Jesus can illumine our path, through what he says, what he does, or who he is.

What difference does it make in our own lives and in the world if we are God’s beloved? Doesn’t that light our way?

Remember the Words of Affirmation from St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians for today: “We are God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life, as from the beginning God has meant us to live it.”

Of course the “good life” in New Testament terms is not about material possessions, but rather about living a life of love, a life of forgiveness, a life furthering peace and justice, a life of good works.

Perhaps in the light of a single candle conquering the darkness, we can visualize our life as God’s work of art and seek to live the good life, a Godly life, following the example of Jesus as he walks beside us.

The main teaching of Jesus is that we are not alone. The light of God is with us, with us in whatever form we believe God to be: God as Father, Mother, Parent, Son, Daughter, Child, Holy Ghost, Holy Spirit, Spirit of God, Spirit of Gentleness or Jesus Christ, our Lord. And because we are not alone, we are strong, empowered, faithful and courageous

The people crossing the bridge for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, fifty years ago knew they were not alone. God, as well as their preachers, inspired them to walk on, regardless of the consequences.

The two most lasting consequences of Bloody Sunday were that the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed into law, and in January, 2009, the first African American President of the United States was inaugurated, something almost unimaginable fifty years ago.

In addition to saying that the light of God is with us, we might also say that the light of God is within us, inside us --- a divine spark, a divine flame, a divine light.

The Quakers, whose official name is the Religious Society of Friends, have a teaching about what they call the inner light, developed by Rufus Jones in 1904.

Rufus Jones believed that there is that of God in everyone, that the light of God shines in everyone, inspiring us and helping us to live as we ought to live. We just need to turn to the light or perhaps turn on the light, rather than attempting to see in the darkness.

That the light of God lives in everyone, helps Quakers come to grips with the difficult issues of our faith: loving our enemy, conscientiously objecting to war, and speaking up against capital punishment.

If you would like to learn more about coming to the light or turning on your inner light before you light your candle in a darkened room, I suggest that you start with the first book of the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew.

The Sermon on the Mount, a collection of the most important teachings of Jesus begins in Chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew, and runs through Chapter 7. That sounds like a lot of reading, but it turns out to be only four pages, four pages that changed the world.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes or “Blesseds,” which are so encouraging:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls us “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.” He asks us to “turn the other cheek” and “love our enemies.”

One of my favorite of teachings of Jesus is Matthew 6:34 –“Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

Not worrying about tomorrow may be one key to the godly life that God means for us to live as his work of art.

Not worrying about tomorrow does not mean that we don’t think about tomorrow --- but we concentrate on the worries of today, today and the worries of tomorrow, tomorrow.

And as we think of our Lord and ponder his message to us, let us remember that it’s better to come to him and light a candle than it is to sit in the darkness alone.

Amen.

MORNING PRAYERS/LORD’S PRAYER

St Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. He was born in 390 AD and died on March 17th, 460.

Legends claim that Patrick taught the people about the Trinity by using a three-leafed shamrock, and that he drove the snakes out of Ireland. It’s true that there are no snakes in Ireland today … and that’s no blarney.

In honor of St. Patrick’s Day on Tuesday, our Morning Prayer is from a prayer attributed to him. The prayer is called “St. Patrick’s Breastplate,” because St. Patrick is seeking God’s protection.

Let us pray:

I bind unto myself the Name,

The strong Name of the Trinity;

By invocation of the same.

The Three in One, and One in Three,

Of Whom all nature hath creation,

Eternal Father, Spirit, Word:

Praise to the Lord of my salvation,

Salvation is of Christ the Lord.

Christ be with me, Christ within me,

Christ behind me, Christ before me,

Christ beside me, Christ to win me,

Christ to comfort and restore me.

Christ beneath me, Christ above me,

Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,

Christ in hearts of all that love me,

Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.