

Second Sunday of Lent
March 20, 2011
Reverend Julio Cruz-Natal, Pastor
Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5; 13-17; John 3:1-17

Light in Darkness

Last Wednesday we began our Soup and Bible Study Lenten Series. As I'm already used to, we had a great group of listeners and talkers. We shared both questions and ideas; doubt and conviction. Some were willing to bring up their questions to the texts we studied. Poignant questions that make you wonder about the pertinence and relevance of these biblical texts in the midst of the things that are ours to live through. They say that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. Nevertheless, it is more common that when our livelihoods are at stake, we are more likely to wonder why. The purpose is not to complain for the mere sake of complaining, the purpose is to search, to look for a way to make sense out of it.

But then we also shared our hopes and aspirations to find, not necessarily clear-cut answers, but more likely just signs that indeed God is still there. We are not quitting, at least not yet; instead what we want to do is to go back to God and look there for something that would be at least a consolation. As part of our discussion during the Bible study, we remembered Job and his endless quest to understand. The thing about Job is that in spite of his suffering he remained faithful to God. He may have complained, and thrown more than a tantrum at God, but what becomes important in the story is precisely that he did not abandon the idea of God. I often say, if you are going to get angry at someone get angry at God; that means that you are still hanging on to that much. You can't be angry at someone or something you don't believe in, do you? So in the midst of whatever is going on in our lives, faith continues to be the sustenance that keeps us going.

Now, when you come to think of it, isn't that what today's texts are about? I mean, it must have been faith what made Abraham listen to God. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." What's in there to hold on to? Just a promise? He left without knowing where. He left without know how he would get there. He left without knowing how he would provide for his family. He left with no assurances other than the kind provided by faith. At times, sometimes it seems like most of the time, faith is all we have to hold on to. But faith is no small consolation. Faith is actually a much bigger source of sustenance than we often realize. Faith is the one thing that we can always go back to when there seems to be nothing else to sustain us. It's not dependent on what I have or lack but rather on what I hope and expect. You see, when the concrete, material, tangible things around us fail or disappear, we still can cling to that. As I say this, I try to keep myself aware of the very serious ethical and human implications of these affirmations. I realize the incredible amounts of pain and suffering that many even at this hour are going through. A year after the fact, the people of Haiti are still struggling to get back on their feet. It has been more than six years after the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Thailand and it is still mind-boggling the kind

of destruction and ravage these people went through. Now in these days, those in Japan not only had to survive another devastating round of nature's power but also the effects of a nuclear disaster. Indeed this would seem like more than anyone could be expected to endure. But precisely what I'm saying is that when everything else fails, for some strange and mysterious reason, we still seem capable of thinking about faith as the one thing that can get us through.

Haven't you made that affirmation yourself? When you lost your job or when your loved one died, didn't you go back to your trust in God as a place to find refuge and solace? Or maybe you went back to God to protest and complain and to demand an explanation to something that didn't make sense. Even in that case you are still going back to God. The fact that we can even acknowledge the presence of God in the midst of our pain and suffering, even if it is only to be mad, must mean something. Isn't that a miracle in itself? Doesn't it marvel you that people are able to go through such difficult trials and still speak about faith? That doesn't happen by accident. The Word of God invites us to seek God not above tragedy—controlling the fates of nature and humanity—but rather amid tragedy, suffering with us, accompanying us, in solidarity with us. This is nowhere more clear than in the cross of Jesus, where God was joined to the fullest human experience of loss—suffering an unjust and cruel death—out of love for us. God is present; not causing chaos but entering into it, not sending calamity but suffering through it, not standing over us but holding tightly onto us and promising never to let go. Wherever there is human tragedy and pain, the incarnate and crucified God is there. The only way in which we can even think of that is through the faith inspired in us through Word and Sacrament by the Holy Spirit. It is faith what does it.

Have you noticed that when Nicodemus approached Jesus he did so in the middle of the night? He may have done so because he was afraid of public association with Jesus. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest legal, legislative, and judicial body among the Jews. The ones that would ultimately condemn Jesus to death. He had reasons to be concerned, so he came at night. In the middle of darkness, hiding, looking over his shoulder. This setting is significant in the gospel of John. Jesus says that the work he has been sent to do has to be done while it is still daylight because night is coming when nothing can be done (Jn. 9:4). It was at night that Judas went to deliver Jesus onto the hands of those that would kill him (Jn. 13:30). And that chain of events—the betrayal, arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus—denotes that daytime is over and that night has begun. The night is dangerous, is filled with perils. In the middle of that, perhaps out of his own faith, Nicodemus comes to Jesus looking for light. Even though he is afraid, he can't resist approaching Jesus. He has to know. He has to find out. "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." You see, even in the middle of the night, even in the middle of danger, and risk, against all odds Nicodemus recognizes that it must be God in front of him. It can't be any other way.

Which is why we can identify with Nicodemus. It is dark around us. We are afraid. We'd rather not be seen, but we want to fade into the background. And then we could also identify with Abraham. We don't have clear sense of direction. We know not where we are going. You combine those two and it is like we are that little moth fluttering around in

the darkness, not knowing where to go but feeling attracted to that source of light. We go to it not sure why but sensing that it has answers to our questions, resolutions to our doubts. That's how faith feels. We can't explain it, we can't reason it. Again, just like Nicodemus, we don't understand it. How does it work? Why does it work? "How can we be born again" asked Nicodemus. It's what God does in us; it is not of the flesh but inspired by the Holy Spirit and it leads us to salvation. It takes us in the direction of God in spite of our fears. It makes us look at the cross as healing. That's what faith does in us. It is our light in the middle of darkness. Amen.