

“In the Light of Judgment”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament lesson: Numbers 21:4-9

New Testament lesson: John 3:14-21

High on a hilltop overlooking the beautiful city of Venice, Italy, there lived an old blind man who was a genius. Legend had it he could answer any question anyone might ask of him. And yet, two of the local boys figured they could fool the old man, so they caught a small bird and headed for his house. One of the boys held the little bird in his hands and asked the old man if the bird was dead or alive. Without hesitation the old man said, “Son, if I say to you that the bird is alive, you will close your hands and crush it. If I say the bird is dead, you will open your hands and the bird will fly away. You see, son, in your hands you hold the power of life and death.”

Leading up to our New Testament reading for today, Nicodemus has come to Jesus in the dead of night and asks, “How can anyone be born (again as a follower of son of God).” And Jesus says it’s in your hands whether you will be born again or not, whether you will enjoy the blessings of heaven on earth or live out your life in a hell of your own choosing.

“... The Son of Man (must) be lifted up,” says Jesus, “(so) that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” It’s all about whether we believe in Salvation through Jesus Christ, or not. Whether you have eternal life with God in his Heavenly Kingdom has to do with what you choose to believe. It’s that simple.

What’s not simple is what eternal life with God looks like, where it is, who will be there and in what form? Those questions are unknowable this side of the cross. And answering those questions this side of the cross is not important. What’s important is whether or not you choose to believe.

If you choose to believe that Jesus is the Son of God who, in just two short weeks – according the church calendar – will be crucified for the salvation of humankind, then that does answer lots of questions this side of the cross – questions like how should I treat other people, what should I fear in life, what should I hold most dear, does God love me and accept me?

If you believe in Jesus, the answers are clear – treat people as you would treat yourself, fear the powers of despair and disbelief, love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and know that God loves you and accepts you, even with all your shortcomings, limitations, and moments of outright defiance.

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

We spend a lot of time worrying about our limitations, failings and defiant nature. God couldn't love a sinner like me, could he? If I stood before God right now, he'd be shaking a finger at me, wouldn't he? I'm not worthy, clearly.

We're not worthy, it's true. You're not worthy. I'm not worthy; nobody is worthy. But everyone is welcome, everyone is embraced, everyone is saved, when they choose to believe in Jesus Christ, and put their trust in the Lord.

It's like the 95-year-old woman at the nursing home. One day, she received a visit from a church member. “How are you feeling?” the visitor asked. “Oh,” said the lady, “I'm just worried sick!” “What are you worried about, dear?” “You look like you're in good health. They are taking care of you, aren't they?” “Yes, they are taking very good care of me.” “Well, what are you worried about?” her friend asked again. The lady leaned back in her rocking chair and slowly explained her major worry. “Every close friend I ever had has already died and gone to heaven. I'm worried they're all wondering where I went” – if not to heaven. We don't have to worry about whether we're going to heaven, or what others might think. Jesus assures us, saying, “Those who believe ... are not condemned....” And then he takes it a step further, saying, “... Those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

In other words, it is not your actions or attitudes that condemn you by the hand of God, but rather it is any refusal to believe and trust in the Lord. That is what separates us from God and God's blessings. God doesn't do it, we do it to ourselves, through our times of disbelief and little faith.

When we let fear or skepticism or the lure and temptation of that which is opposed to God and God's will take hold of our lives, we condemn ourselves to life apart from God, which is no life at all.

So, how do we know what is good and faithful and what is not? How do we judge? And when we are in the grip of worldly fear or temptation, how do we free ourselves?

“... This is the judgment,” says Jesus, “that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” In the light of God's judgment, evil cannot stand. If you feel gripped by that which is opposed to God, shine some light on it – talk to a trusted friend, pastor or counselor. God will lead you from the darkness back into the light.

Believe it, or not. Step out in faith, or not. Trust in the Lord, or not. Step into life eternal with God, or stay in the grip of what's holding you back; it's your choice. As Dr. Stancil said in our Sunday school hour – all choices in life begin with choosing Christ, or not.

Interestingly, we don't ever learn the fate of Nicodemus in the Bible. We don't learn the fate of Nicodemus because this exchange with Jesus is not for the benefit of Nicodemus. It's for our benefit, for our salvation.

We are left to either trust in Jesus and walk into the light, or turn our backs on faith and distance ourselves from God.

We make those choices all the time, every day. Eternal life with God is not in some far off place at some later time. It is now. Eternal life with God is beyond time and space – that's what the word eternal means.

Every moment of our lives, every choice we make is an opportunity to draw closer to God in a heaven right here on earth. Of course, we will never do this perfectly or completely, not on this side of the cross.

And we don't have to. Jesus has already done it perfectly for us. God sees us only through the Cross of Jesus.

As long as we continue to draw close to God through our faith in Jesus, God will take our weakness and use it to overcome the powers of evil, God will take our limitations and use them to bless the lives of others, God will take even our wrong choices and use them to turn us back toward God.

So don't despair over your life, your misguided ways, or the misguided ways of this world. Instead, have faith – faith in the Lord, faith that in the Lord, God does not condemn you or the world around you, but rather, God embraces you and leads you ever onward toward the cross of Jesus, the cross of our salvation. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, you have gone to great risks for us. Becoming human, you allowed an element of uncertainty in your future. You gave your Son the freedom to refuse you.

But Jesus took the risk of following you. He took the risk of saying “no” to Satan in the wilderness.

He took the risk of being rejected by those who knew him best. He took the risk that even his followers wouldn’t recognize him for who he was. He took the risk of dying on the cross.

We sometimes like risk in our lives, especially when it seems like it might get us a little more money or power or admiration. But we shy away from the risk of giving it all away.

Help us to take the risk of following you. You know it isn’t easy for us to give you all of who we are. We’d like to play it safe, to keep a portion of our lives back for our own purposes.

Help us to say “no” to all that separates us from you. Help us proclaim what you have done for us, even when we run the risk of alienating friends or loved ones.

And if you have a cross for us, help us to take it up. Help us to know that giving our lives to you is the safest risk we will ever take.

In Jesus’ name we pray – praying for all those we’ve mentioned here today and all those not mentioned who are on our hearts and minds – praying as he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.