

Sermon – John 3:1-17
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
2 Lent – Year A
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“I Lift up My Eyes”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. In 1527, the plague came to Wittenberg. After a case was diagnosed on August 2, the German town’s emergency response system kicked into high gear. The university closed down and students were sent home. While phrases like “social distancing” were unknown, the concept wasn’t; people knew enough to steer clear of those who showed evidence of the disease. Many people left the town to find safety from the plague. Many of these same people urged Martin Luther to do likewise. It would have been hard to blame Martin for leaving town. He and his wife, Katharina, had an infant son and another child on the way. And he was busy, you know, changing the world and reforming the church for the sake of the gospel. If anyone should have been whisked away to safety, surely it was Luther. So what did he do? He stayed. He stayed, and the Luthers opened their home as a haven for those suffering from the deadly disease. Why? Because they needed to be cared for, physically and spiritually – the hear the gospel and receive the sacrament in what might have been their final hours. Make no mistake, Luther was no fool. He did not believe that his faith would magically ward off infection. He urged practical responses that leaned into the best medical insights of the day, and indeed felt that the correct response for many was to leave town. But not him. His place was with his neighbors. “This I well know,” he wrote, “that if it were Christ or his mother who were laid low by illness everybody would be so solicitous and would gladly become a servant or helper. Everyone would want to be bold and fearless; nobody would flee but everyone would come

running. If you wish to serve Christ and to wait on him, very well, you have your sick neighbor close at hand. Go to him and serve him, and you will surely find Christ in him.” Martin Luther took Jesus at his Word, thinking of Matthew 25 and the parable of the sheep and the goats. When did we see you sick, Jesus? When you saw your neighbor sick, that’s when. If you want to be in the present of Jesus, enter the presence of those who are suffering, for Jesus is already there.

2. In 2019, the novel coronavirus came into our world. It is hard to know how to respond, what to think. Some make light of it, suggesting there is nothing at all to worry about. Others are buying all the toilet paper and hand sanitizer they can find. I’m in between, trying to stand on the middle ground of responsible preparation, seeking prudence while pushing back against fear and anxiety. My hope is that it won’t get worse, that our worst fears are overblown; my prayer is that we will be kept safe. But none of us know what the future holds; not regarding this virus, not regarding anything else. Pretend otherwise as we might, we live in a world of intertwined uncertainties. Illnesses emerge. Stock markets tumble. Electoral processes pull us this way and that. And that, of course, is just what’s on the news. Our own worries stalk us, too. Health, physical or mental, is never a given. Meaningful employment eludes us. Relationships break. What are we to do in time of darkness and confusion?
3. Today, a good thing for us to do would be to journey in the dark with confused Nicodemus. Like you, like me, Nicodemus is a person of faith. A Pharisee, yes, but he’s not out to get Jesus. We don’t know his backstory. Perhaps life has recently thrown him for a loop, if not under an anachronistic bus. Nicodemus has heard of Jesus’ signs, most likely of his turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana – a sign and wonder pointing not just to Jesus’ power but signifying his *modus operandi*, that with Jesus the best is always yet to come. What can this Jesus be up to? The Pharisee is eager but

unprepared to hear what Jesus has to tell him. To understand what Jesus is saying, doing, Nicodemus needs to be born again. I don't fault Nicodemus for his confusion at this point. After all, I've witnessed three children enter this world. Not once did it seem feasible to put the child back in and do it over again, even had any of the participants been willing. Jesus, however, is not simply saying that we need to be born a second time, although that is true. We also need to be born in a different way – from above and of the Spirit. We need to die to the ways of this world and be reborn as children of God. Birth is precisely the right way to speak of this because, after all, none of us chose to be born. It is something that happened to us without so much as a by your leave. So it is to be born of the Spirit. God neither asks for nor needs our permission. We are born again, from above, because the Spirit wills it. And how does the Spirit will this? We see the answer as we lift up our eyes to see the One who has come down to us.

4. Jesus recalls for Nicodemus a story of their ancestors. Wandering on the way to the Promised Land, the people were afflicted by poisonous snakes. They cry out to Moses, praying that the Lord would remove the snakes. But that's not what God chooses to do. Instead, God tells Moses to fashion a serpent of bronze. He does so and holds it aloft, so that anyone who was bitten could look upon the snake and live. Instead of lifting the people out of their problem, God joins them within it. They look upon an image of what afflicts them. Strangely, they live. Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand that this is the work he has come to perform, but now writ large for all of creation. God may not immediately remove that which afflicts us, but God has joined us in our affliction. Just as the people once looked upon the serpent to be saved from serpents, so now are we invited to look with Nicodemus upon the crucified Jesus, seeing in death our salvation from death. In Jesus' cross, we see the full revelation of God's love. How much does God love us? Enough to die the death that rightly belongs to us that we might live. Jesus' arms are stretched out by the soldiers, but God turns this into the moment through

- which God embraces all humanity. God so loves the world that Jesus was given to die for us. All we need do is believe, not so much yet as credal formulation but as a yearning trust – to look upon Christ and see our salvation; to turn to Jesus and live.
5. Alive in Christ, we are exactly that. We live, forgiven and free. This means that we, too, need not flee from the suffering of this world. When the world seems like it's descending into chaos and crisis, we look to the One who descended to be with us; the One who died and was raised so that our lives would no longer be defined by sickness, sin, suffering, or death. In moments like this, we remember the gospel so well summed up in John 3:16. God's love, shown and given in Jesus' death, gives us new birth and sets us free from death. Believe that, even and especially in moments of fear. No, this doesn't mean we should be cavalier with our health and wellness. But yes, it does mean that we go where Jesus goes, into the needs of our neighbors.
 6. Over the past two days, I spent time with ten of our fourth graders and their parents, learning about God's gifts given in Holy Communion. Some of these youth are preparing to receive the sacrament for the first time, others have been communing since they were much younger. But none of them could remember being baptized. It happened to each of them too early in life; they had no say in the matter. That's how it goes with birth. God, working through their parents, simply chose them. On Friday night, we gathered around the font in the narthex. Each parent marked their child with a dripping cross: "Remember that you are a child of God." And then each child marked their parent, saying the same. And that is it. God so loved the world. Jesus died for you. Jesus lives for you. For all of you. And Jesus lives through you, for all of them. Whatever comes of this virus, or of anything else, the basic reality of our living and dying is unchanged. God gave Jesus to die so that we would live, and that living we would love. Believe in this; let this guide your life. Not fear. Not selfishness. Not self-preservation. No, let the love of God, given in

Christ, rule in your hearts and guide you to care for your neighbor. Death is already defeated. New life has already begun. For the people of God there is no time to be afraid; after all, with Jesus the best is always yet to come. There is only time to live, and to love, and to do so in the name of Jesus. We face the uncertain future in faith, for we know the certain future will follow that, a world in which life has conquered death. Whatever these days bring, you can believe in the promise, and you can trust in God. As Luther taught us to sing in his great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress," written not long after the plague came to Germany, no matter what is taken from us, "the Kingdom's ours forever." Should you find yourself forgetting, look up. Look to Christ crucified, and live. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.