

4 Lent – Year B – March 22, 2009
Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21
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The ancient town of Glastonbury lies nestled in the picturesque rolling hills of Somerset in England. Vibrant with myriad layers of history, the land carries a memory of the lives of thousands upon thousands who have lived there, worshipped there, visited or traveled through. Discoveries of Neolithic flint tools tell us that this place has been inhabited since prehistoric times. In the year 705 A.D. King Ine is said to have founded a monastery there, which became a Benedictine house in the 10th century. The Abbey church was built in the 13th and 14th centuries, only to be left in ruins during the Dissolution of the monasteries by King Henry VIII some time in the early 16th century. Legend has it that Joseph of Arimathea, the one in whose tomb Jesus laid for three days, came to this site with the Holy Grail, a cup filled with Christ's blood. He is also credited with planting his staff in the soil, which miraculously flowered into the Holy Thorn – a type of hawthorn tree that only grows within a few miles of Glastonbury.

With yet another twist of the yarn in this rich tapestry of myth and legend, Glastonbury Abbey is also reputed to be the final resting place of the legendary King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. Even with the long history of Christian worship, Glastonbury stands at a crossroads, both geographically and spiritually. It is built atop the hidden lines of magnetic power or ley lines, and consequently, rather like our own Sedona, attracts its share of pagan and occult worship. Glastonbury is a place of legend and pilgrimage. It is also a place of deep spiritual conflict, the dueling forces of light and darkness are a constant reminder that Glastonbury is one of many locations that reflects a broader spiritual conflict present throughout the world. And yet, there is also an element of the microcosm of an internal universal struggle within the hearts and minds of all humanity. Despite the philosophical influences, the polarities of light and dark still have great power to capture our imagination and illumine our understanding of Scripture.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Light of the world, has come into the world, not to judge the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him. As we saw last week, the witness of John's Gospel provides a wonderfully nuanced study of what the coming of the Messiah means. This week's reading takes us another step. John's symbolic use of light and darkness both reveals and hides the truth of God, and the powerful reality of Jesus the man, as well as Jesus, God incarnate. Jesus, as *the* Light of the world, both represents and is in His being and doing, the presence of Truth. The light that John is talking about is the knowledge of divine truth that cleanses and heals. There is a vast distance between the understanding we have as human beings and divine knowledge. The former frequently fools us into thinking we are self-sufficient, whereas divine knowledge brightens even the dimmest eyes to see, and enlivens the hearts of God's children to believe and trust in the Son of Man. Divine knowledge is also the revelatory light through which you and I increase in spiritual purity or holiness that in turns compels us to move closer into Christ's Light. As we already know from our experience it is hardly ever a straight path, but more like the snaking path that leads up to Glastonbury Tor. Or the beautifully ingrained, yet tortured-looking spiral trunks of the juniper trees that grow nearest the fields of power or vortexes in Sedona. If you haven't seen them, the trees look like a giant hand has picked them up and wrung them, leaving them to dry just so, without shaking them out. Jesus, as the Light of the world, embodies and shares the power of understanding the mysteries of God and of ourselves, in the fullness of light that is His own humanity, and divinity.

In our own labyrinthine walk of Lent, the pilgrims' path we tread of self-reflection and repentance is leading you and me ever closer to Jerusalem. The shadow of the cross becomes sharper in the presence of Christ's Light. What is the light revealing about the crosses we bear with God's

help? At this point in our journey, God may also be asking us to examine what part of ourselves is still hiding in the darkness that paradoxically only becomes apparent because of the Light. John is clear that this is also about the concrete – the things we do and say. Jesus' will is so aligned with God's will that all His work and words in the world are filled with God's love, justice, and mercy. I'm not Jesus, and I most certainly cannot claim the same, but I can and I do desire the shift to Christ-likeness, as I turn my head to be reconciled to God in Christ, and open my heart again to the gift of healing Light in Him. As God's servants you and I are responsible for picking up our cross each day, and speaking the truth in love through our words and deeds. For those who choose darkness over light, the shadow of the cross first blurs, fades and finally disappears as they walk further from relationship with the divine Light that is Christ Jesus, into the darkness filled with the lures of the world and endless amusements and distractions grounded in self. Those who love the darkness condemn themselves in their choice.

As author Ann Kiemel reminds us, "The most important thing in my life is that I chose to follow Jesus. No-one makes me. I chose to. I have chosen to follow Him because He loves me and love makes all the difference." Love. There is no greater gift for the life of the world. As John declares, "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." In love, Jesus acknowledges that He too will be lifted up on a tree. Just as Moses was commanded to lift up a serpent to offer healing for the Israelites in the wilderness, God chooses to heal the world, through the cross of Christ. Let's work together right now to do a little mental exercise from the writings of Aidan Clarke. In our memories let's "Go to the busiest crossroads [we] know, [wherever that is] and try to notice everything: the people... and cars, ... the colors, the noises. [Look up and see] the clouds, the birds, the spaces. Notice the impatience. Now picture the cross on which Jesus died as a crossroads of people, time and place.... Understand the cross as a meeting-place of all history with God, the source of all love, forgiveness, [healing], and peace."

Our paths cross with those of many others. You and I carry the powerful truth of God's love and grace. We also carry the Light of Christ through the towns, cities, and countries that are our earthly home filled with a wilderness of confusion, pain, and darkness. Christians have a living rod to plant that by God's grace may grow into a tree of life. Each member in the Body of Christ bears a staff that brings sustenance to a hungry world. You and I have the power of the Word to ignite the Spirit and enlighten the hearts of all. These are more than symbols. They are real gifts that flesh and blood, hands, feet, and mouths – you and I, and all our brothers and sisters in Christ -- share in His name. However dark the days of Lent may seem, it is nonetheless a time of renewal. However chaotic our broken world appears; filled with torment, violence, and injustice, the Light of Christ cannot be overcome. There is no power on earth that can separate us from the love of God. We do not need to seek the Holy Grail, because we already have the cup of salvation. There is only one King, Jesus Christ, in whom we are safe from all those who would seek to dissolve or rend our relationships with God or one another. There is no part of our winding walk up and down the hills and valleys of life where Christ is not walking right alongside us. And each time we come to a crossroad, it is a reminder of the cross of Christ, a time and a place to meet God once again, know that we are healed and forgiven, and be filled with God's love and peace. Whether we have traveled miles and miles as pilgrims or just a few steps, in the continuing story of the history of salvation, God tells us, God shows us -- and all who seek God's love -- that eternal life is always found in the Light who is Christ, our Lord.

Amen.