

Moving Out of the Shadows

Bishop Ough's 2017 Ash Wednesday message



I am pleased to greet you as we enter our 40-day Lenten journey that will culminate in the Easter festival celebrating Jesus' resurrection and victory over sin and death.

During these 40 days, commencing with Ash Wednesday, we journey with Jesus as he claims and fulfills his mission. It is a season in which we too are meant to experience and carry out God's ultimate mission for our lives. We do so through our Lenten disciplines of self-denial, repentance, and becoming more fully obedient, even to the point of dying to our old selves and being born again.

One of the biblical texts that informs my Lenten journey is the story of Nicodemus recorded in John's Gospel (John 3:1-17). You know this story well. It is one of my favorites because the story is not just about Nicodemus. It's about me and about all of us. John is telling *our* stories of emptying ourselves, humbling ourselves, becoming obedient so that we can embrace God's mission for our lives and that mission alone.

Nicodemus is mired in his presumptions and his impoverished spiritual imagination. Nicodemus is confined by his limited view of reality. Nicodemus

is defined by a fixed, immutable world, confident of his religious knowledge and closed to the surprising, the improbable, the Spirit of God, a new way of viewing himself and God's dream for him.

Nicodemus keeps seeking and inquiring in the dark, unable and unwilling to expose himself to the full light of Jesus. Nicodemus is not prepared to die to his old self and allow new life to be birthed in him. Nicodemus is not ready to surrender fully and let God's Spirit live and reign in him.

Ouch! This really is about us, isn't it? I, for one, confess that the state of my soul is like Nicodemus' as I enter into this Lenten season.

Yet deep within the recesses of Nicodemus' soul is a small flicker of holy curiosity about the kingdom of which Jesus speaks and which he had witnessed. Deep within a corner of Nicodemus' spirit, this flicker of hunger for new life drives him to seek Jesus but still in the security of the shadows.

Jesus jumps all over Nicodemus' curiosity and invites him to be born again, start anew. He reminds Nicodemus that all things are now possible because "God so loved the world that God gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16), abundant life, new life.

Our Lenten journey, the very journey we are entering into, is one of moving out of the darkness of sin and the shadows of doubt into the new life in Christ—"birth from above," as Jesus said.

It is a joy, one of the true blessings of being your bishop, to witness Holy Spirit breakthroughs in individual lives and congregations throughout the Dakotas and Minnesota Conferences. I witness congregations and individuals on the same journey as Nicodemus. They are moving from the tentativeness of shrink-wrapped faith to risk-taking faith and mission. They are allowing their curiosity about new life to overwhelm their fear and well-worn traditions and preferences to embrace and be guided by the unlimited imagination of God.

This is the journey from despair and death to resurrection. This is the journey that takes us to the cross and then to the empty tomb.

I pray this will be your spiritual journey this Lenten season. Thanks be to God's Spirit for calling us, guiding us, and equipping us for the journey from the shadows to renewed life in Christ. May it be so!

Bishop Bruce R. Ough
Dakotas-Minnesota Area
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