

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The story is told of a woman named Sue who was pregnant with her second child. Sue's three-year-old son, Bobby, was afraid of the dark. Sue tried everything to calm his fear. She tried leaving a light on in the hall. That didn't work. Then, she put a night-light on in Bobby's room. That didn't work. Nothing she did helped. Bobby would cry out in the middle of the night and come running to her in terror.

One night as she held him against her to comfort him, he touched her round belly and asked, "Mama, is it dark inside there where my little brother is?" He was convinced that his yet unborn sister would be a boy.

"Yes," Sue replied, "it's dark in there." Bobby thought about that for a long minute, then said, "He doesn't even have a night-light, does he?" "I don't think so," his Mother explained, "because he's not really alone. He's inside of me. I'm always with him."

Suddenly Sue had an inspiration. "And it's the same way with you," the loving Mother explained. "When it's dark and you think you're all by yourself, you really aren't. I carry you inside me too, right here in my heart."

Looking straight into Bobby's eyes as she said this, Sue wondered if he understood what she meant. After about a minute, Bobby smiled, reached up and kissed his Mother and said, "Good night, Mama." He went right back to his bedroom, turned off the night-light and was soon asleep. That was the last time that Bobby woke up scared during the night.

Children aren't the only ones afraid of the dark. In today's Gospel we hear Jesus address such a man, named Nicodemus. Even though he was a high ranking member of the Temple, he was confused and frightened. He wanted to understand God and how he could enter into God's Kingdom. The more he struggled to understand, the more confused and frightened he became. Then he heard about Jesus who according to what he had been told was always talking about the Kingdom of God and what it was like. So, under the cover of darkness because he was afraid what the other members of the Sanhedrin, the high council of the Temple would say, he found Jesus on the outskirts of town.

As he listened to Jesus, poor Nicodemus became even more confused when Jesus told him, "No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again," Jesus was speaking, of course, of spiritual rebirth, but Nicodemus was thinking of physical birth. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can he go back into his Mother's womb?" Nicodemus asked.

Recognizing that Nicodemus was missing the point, Jesus patiently directed Nicodemus toward what he would understand since he was well-read in the Bible. He reminded Nicodemus of the time when some of the people of Israel were being bitten by snakes.

Some even died of the snake bites. Moses cries out to God to save his people. God directs Moses to make a serpent, and set it on a pole (the story we heard in our first reading this morning). When the people looked at the snake, even if they were bitten, they were healed. They no longer feared the snakes and once again trusted God, and his servant, Moses.

Nicodemus remembered the story. In the same way, Jesus tells Nicodemus, God's people will one day look to the Cross and live. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

That was Jesus' advice to Nicodemus then, as it is to us now. Look to the Cross. In those moments when fear seems to get the better of us; when the light at the end of the tunnel is an oncoming train; when the only luck we seem to have is bad, look to the Cross. That is where our hope lies, on a hill called Golgotha. When we are discouraged, when we are down and nearly out, when we are experiencing our own fear of the night, look to the Cross.

No matter the pain, the heartache, the worry, fear, or confusion you have brought with you to Church this morning, look to the Cross. Then, as you look, listen carefully in the deepest part of your being to the One who hangs upon the Cross, "I know how you feel. I've been there myself." Then, as the Spirit of God who dwells within you, Who now finds an opening in your heart, you may find yourself saying something like, "I'm going to beat this thing. I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me."

But this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus does not end with the allusion to the serpent in the wilderness. Jesus has a message for Nicodemus and for us as well. It was to the pain and fear and confusion in Nicodemus (and in us) that Jesus spoke these words. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

Jesus was trying to move Nicodemus from a life of law to a life of love. He was trying to impress on him the extravagance of God's love. It is love in its purest form.

Can you be patient with me as I share with you another short story that will illustrate what Jesus is telling us. It's a story that comes out of the Bedouin culture. The Bedouin are the desert dwellers who wander throughout the Middle East from Syria to Iraq to Israel and into Iran and even Saudi Arabia today much as they did in the time of the Old Testament.

During a heated argument, as the story goes, a young Bedouin struck and killed a friend of his. Know the ancient, inflexible customs of his people, the young man fled, running across the desert under the cover of darkness, seeking safety.

He went to the black tent of the tribal chief to seek his protection. The old chief took the young Arab in, assuring him that he would be safe until the matter could be settled legally.

The next day, the young man's pursuers arrived, demanding the murderer be turned over to them so that the ancient justice could prevail—"an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth". "But I have given my word," protested the chief.

"But you don't know whom he killed!" the pursuers said. "I have given my word," the chief repeated.

"HE KILLED YOUR SON!" one of them blurted out. The chief deeply and visibly shaken, stood speechless with his head bowed for a long time. The accused and the accusers, as well as curious onlookers waited breathlessly. What terrible fate awaited the young man?

Finally, the old man raised his head. "Then he shall become my son," said the distraught father, "and everything I have will one day be his."

The young man certainly didn't deserve such generosity. And that, of course, is the point. Love in its purest form is beyond comprehension. No one can merit it. It is freely given. It is the way of God. It is God's love. Look to the cross. At the cross we encounter love in its purest form. At the cross is healing and life. There we find a God who loves and cares deeply for each of us, a God who carries each of us near His Heart.

Remember Sue telling her three-year-old son, Bobby, "I carry you inside me too. Right here in my heart." So it is with God.

God is not up there somewhere. He is not just all around us. God is within us, and what is best of all, each of us, all of us, are, and always will be within the heart of God. Look to the Cross!