

Encountering the Love of GOD

in the lifting up and in the groundwork

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs
John 3:1-17

Trinity B | May 31, 2015

Focus

There's a joke clergy like to make this week every year. We send each other videos and post memes on Facebook about the challenge of preaching on Trinity Sunday. It is known by many as the one day each year in which the most heresy is preached. The day in which preachers all over trap themselves in lame *and heretical* descriptions of what the trinity is like. Now, I never said these were *funny* jokes. Just that we insist on making them.

I don't say these next words easily, but in giving this story again (we just read it in Lent), the lectionary creators are actually doing us a favor. I usually don't like repeats so soon. However, given the day, I'm thankful this Gospel story does not evoke trinitarian theology in any direct or obvious way. It doesn't drive us to speak about three co-equal persons of a triune, but monotheistic godhead. No philosophical theology to confuse us. For that, I am grateful.

What it does instead, is direct our attention to GOD. In a story of Jesus, with one of the most famous lines in all of Jesus's ministry, it is a story about GOD and Jesus wanting to point to GOD. That pointing to GOD should be our focus, then. Not on the orthodoxy of our theology, but on that which Jesus reveals: the loving character of GOD.

Today's story is rich with intrigue and complex theology. The sort of story scholars have written volumes about and fanatics can't actually put into words, so they paint the verse number on signs or stick it to their bumper. Because there is just too much there for us to speak to succinctly, without zooming all the way out to the intergalactic view, where we can simply say: *GOD loves. GOD loves **this much.***

Jesus and Nicodemus

It is right that this complex story takes place in the dark. So fitting. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, finding Jesus when nobody can witness the encounter. And Nicodemus comes as a character we aren't sure about. This is early enough in the gospel that we don't despise the Pharisees yet, so Nicodemus isn't one of the "bad guys". And he has been traditionally taken as trying to trap Jesus, evoking the pattern the Pharisees would take later in the book. But there isn't enough to know for sure.

For us, we know only that it is dark and nobody is there. The perfect metaphor for how one comes to Jesus with honest and difficult questions: alone in the dark.

Their interaction is stilted and strange, too. Statements of power and godly work. Questions of authority and expectation. And ultimately, Nicodemus sort of disappears from the story halfway through. It's kind of weird, actually.

In the bigger story of John, it isn't weird. In the story of what Jesus is doing, it makes more sense. But before we leave Nicodemus behind, hold his part in the story in your mind for a minute. He is not only a Pharisee, but a leader. He's powerful, smart, educated. Most importantly, he has a lot of influence. And he comes to Jesus when there are no witnesses and where he can't be caught.

And he asks Jesus about what GOD is doing and then he disappears from the story. When he comes back, many chapters later, he is described as a secret disciple. That means that something here changes Nicodemus. And chances are, it isn't reading a sign or Tim Tebow's custom eye black that simply reads "John 3:16".

Lifted up

The language Jesus uses extensively here and throughout John is elevated. Literally. As in this man is speaking to Jesus about being "born from above." Jesus speaks of lifting things up and being lifted up. Raised, elevated. Like when we are invited to Lift up our hearts to the LORD.

We know that GOD is up, yes, but we have two other "ups" in this passage. We have the snake, lifted up. Jesus refers to the story in Numbers when the people are being poisoned by these snakes and GOD has Moses lift up this snake, that all who are bitten by a snake would be healed.

This, Jesus says against his own being "lifted up", not in the Ascension, not in his joining of GOD, though that is a reverberating image for us, but in his being lifted up on a cross. This is something he mentions throughout the gospel. That what Jesus has come to do involves, ultimately, dying on the cross. This idea, Jesus comes back to again and again: that he will be lifted up on the cross: not lifted to a throne to be exalted, but to a cross to be despised.

This act of self-sacrifice heals like the snake, not because of magic powers, not because the snake has powers or that Jesus has powers, but because GOD heals the people and GOD brings new life to us.

Because that is what GOD does. GOD loves the world; GOD loves creation and the people and wants better for us. We remember that this is about GOD, and what GOD is doing. And GOD loves it all, not just some of the people and not just the people and not just creation. But GOD loves all of the world.

And because GOD loves the world, GOD looks and sees that we are dying and GOD doesn't like this. GOD is about life! But we remember this isn't about that moment when we're 87 years old and we finally kick it, or when we go in a car crash, it isn't about the being alive one moment and dead the next; in John, Jesus doesn't talk about life and death that way, he talks about living and **really** living. He talks about the difference between the ones living a vibrant, present life and those who are the walking dead. That's his life and death.

So GOD loves the world so much that GOD would look at this life, this living, really and see also this dying, this walking dead life and saying *I'm going to do something about it! I'll send my son into the world, not because I want insiders or outsiders or so that some of these people get to really live and the rest will be zombies, but so the **whole** world will be saved from this fate worse than death.*

Working with GOD

We see in this the lengths that GOD will go, out of love to give to the world. We see how GOD is motivated to act, to do something about this life, this way of life we are living so that we can live well, that we can really live. That **this** is how GOD loves. Us, everyone, and everything.

But GOD doesn't just do stuff **to** us. GOD doesn't just send a messenger to us. GOD partners with us and shares humanity with us. The intimate, scary, existence of living and loving and dying. To reveal how much GOD loves and the way GOD loves. To show us that this love of GOD's is a partnership and a new way of living. As Tripp Fuller puts it:

“This text is about GOD's love for the world, **GOD refusing to be GOD without us**, and GOD's insistence that the perishing consequences: the brokenness in the world: **are not something GOD separates GOD's self from**, but that GOD addresses and receives into the divine life and transforms them through the power of the resurrection so that we too can share in this eternal life.”

We are divine collaborators with GOD, with the one who calls us into collaboration, so that living in this world **with GOD**, not just in this culture, but in this holy creation means we can be truly living: vibrant, present, in-the-moment living.

It's not about the substance of Jesus or the Holy Spirit and how these two relate with the first person of the trinity. It isn't about needing to memorize old theological texts and memorizing creeds of the church. It isn't about getting it right or making sure our neighbors get it right.

It's about living and collaborating with a GOD revealed as a collaborator, willing to incarnate himself, willing to not only put GODself out there that one time 2000 years ago, but over and over again, with each and every one of us, that we might live. Truly live. That we might love like GOD loves. A love of living and dying and living anew.

May we encounter GOD, not only in our holy places at our appointed times, but in our lives and our loves. Now and always. Amen.