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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A11
2 Lent (Year A) 11:00 a.m. & 6:00 p.m. Eucharist
17
Sunday 8 March 2020

Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-
17
John 3:1-17

Love in the Time of Coronavirus

"The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn. 3).

Nicodemus has the respect of the people in his world. He has authority as a religious leader. His words have power. But he also has a kind of virus, a dis-ease. Life seems normal to pretty much everyone, but for him something has changed. He does not feel like himself anymore and he is a little worried that others might notice.

The Holy Spirit, to use our modern expression, "is going viral" in his world and he is one of the first people to suspect that he has caught it. And so Nicodemus goes to Jesus in the secrecy of night. He wants to learn more about his condition, to know if Jesus is real. Nicodemus hopes to be healed and whole. He longs to fully realize his nature as a child of God. But he is afraid of something too. Nicodemus seems to be on the cusp of a great breakthrough and yet he worries about what he might have to lose. He is afraid of what others will think.

At breakfast on Thursday a friend shared a video on his cell phone that begins at a routine traffic checkpoint in China. A car comes to a stop and the driver rolls down the window. A masked police officer touches his face with a sensor and suddenly total pandemonium breaks out. The driver has a fever. A crouching SWAT team approaches yelling with a huge plastic shield. At first the man tries to drive off but only moves a few feet.

He jumps out of his car, rips off his surgical mask and the threat of danger feels palpable. The SWAT team, in their biohazard suits, confront him and seconds later the police officers use a pole to net the man's head. Quickly they bend his arms back, put restraints on his wrists and a black hood over his head. As they wrestle him away from the scene, a team sprays all around the car as everyone else lines up to be disinfected – front and back.¹

That's what is at stake for love in the time of coronavirus. During these days we again realize a truth that we have pushed deep into our subconscious. In a moment we could

go from being the center of our own universe, from being accepted and perhaps even respected by the community. And then suddenly we are treated as a grave danger to others, like a diseased animal that needs to be quickly slaughtered for the sake of the whole society. There are many forms of dehumanization. Events of recent days make us more aware of our vulnerability. In the Cathedral's Year of Bridges we are realizing that this is one world, we are all on this cruise ship together miles away from safe harbor.

And yet a persistent voice inside us, a spirit that blows where it will, reminds us that we are from God, of God and that we belong in God as our true home. This is the most basic fact of our human condition. On the one hand we need the company, respect and approval of others. And yet at the same time they can be dangerous to us, they can be a threat to our feelings, and in more extreme situations even our freedom or our life. This is true in the time of coronavirus and always.

In moments like this Jesus has so much to offer. The reformer Martin Luther calls John 3:16 "the Gospel in miniature." But Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus who is a religious leader, a biblical expert, so interpreting this story is not a straightforward matter. Today let me offer three keys necessary for understanding what Jesus teaches us about the spirit and God.

1. First, Nicodemus and Jesus seem to be speaking in riddles and puzzles. A short Greek lesson can help. The Greek word for spirit and wind is the same (pneuma). Jesus uses this image of pneuma to describe how the presence of God is independent of human intentions and beyond our control. He goes on to say that, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," that is without being born of this same spirit. The Greek word (anothen) could mean "born from above" or "born anew," and I think Jesus means both.

A friend of mine has a t-shirt that says, "Science doesn't care what you believe." The spirit is a like this too. When we encounter God we experience something that is independent of our control, a presence that also changes us. Jesus knows that Nicodemus feels the call of this spirit but isn't ready to commit and I think this frustrates Jesus. So Jesus goes on to try to tell him who God is.

2. My second point has to do with a crucial reference that Jesus makes to Holy Scriptures, one which Nicodemus surely recognizes. Knowing this story is absolutely essential for understanding what Jesus means. In the first five books of the Bible, called the Torah, there are nearly a dozen examples of the Ancient Israelites complaining about their life, after God has freed them from being slaves in Egypt.

In the last example of this the author uniquely describes the way the Israelites “spoke against God and against Moses” (Num. 21:5-9). This people contradict themselves saying both that they don’t have food and water and that they detest the food that they do have. They speak against the very one who is protecting and saving them. As a consequence God allows poisonous snakes to come among them and they begin dying at a horrifying rate. We cannot perfectly put ourselves in that situation, but we are getting closer as we hear about new infections of coronavirus every night.

In both this exodus story and the Gospel of John sin is less a punishment from God than it is a self-destructive human choice. In the worldview of the Gospel of John sin is the decision to live selfishly in the shadows, to avoid the light of truth – the truth that we depend on God and each other, that we have responsibilities beyond ourselves.

The point of both stories is that although human beings have gotten themselves into trouble, God intervenes to save us. Even though the Israelites have brought their suffering on themselves, God instructs Moses on how to save them. God says that if Moses will make a bronze image of a snake on a pole, the people who see it will live. It is a cure, an immunization against what was killing them.

God could have saved the people of Israel through any object, but chose to do it through the very thing that they fear most, an image of exactly what is destroying them. God takes the object of their greatest horror, a deadly poisonous snake and makes it into the best thing in the world, an instrument of healing.²

To answer Nicodemus’ question about who God is Jesus compares the healing snake of Moses to Jesus’ own death. He says, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (Jn. 3). In this world which is poisoned by envy, greed, fear, betrayal and death – Jesus promises that we can be healed by experiencing him near to us in our suffering, and the hope that we have for the resurrection.

Just like Moses and the snake, God takes the cross which is the empire’s weapon of fear, torture and death, and makes it into a sign of the way God is with us in humiliation, defeat and suffering. Who is God? The one who is with us even in our darkest moments when we feel cast off by everyone.

3. My last point has to do with what my friend Matt Boulton calls the “anti-Gospel.” Gospel means good news and the Gospel of Jesus Christ is really good news for all people, not just Christians. It is the message that God does not condemn the world, but always reaches out to save us even when our choices have led us disastrously astray. But

somehow many Christians warp Jesus' words into an anti-gospel which is a message of contempt and exclusion.³

At the heart of this debate is the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." In King James English "so" frequently means, "in this way" and is a good translation of the Greek word *houtos*. Today though "so" means "very," or "to a great extent," or "a lot," for instance, when we compliment someone by saying that they are so smart or so capable.

The Greek doesn't mean to emphasize "how much" God loves us but instead shows us the character of God's love, that God loves us in this way, through not even withholding his own son. The point is not that Jesus only saves the few who believe, but like the Israelites looking at the snake, everyone is healed by God through Jesus. John confirms this interpretation and writes, "God did not send his son to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (Jn. 3).

The great teacher Nicodemus had the respect of other people. He did not want to put himself in danger. And yet still he felt the pull of the spirit, so he visited Jesus by night. Nicodemus learned that the spirit is free and that if we let it, the spirit will show us the kingdom of God. He came to see that Jesus teaches us a deeper way to be human which is like the antidote to the poisons of social life. Jesus shows us that God does not divide us into groups of loved ones and outcasts.

Over time Nicodemus came to love Jesus. He later became a follower of Jesus during the daytime too. We remember him less for his stubbornness on that night than for the great risk he took in bringing the spices to the tomb for anointing Jesus' body.

Brothers and sisters, as the number of coronavirus cases increase, as we worry about ourselves and the ones we love, as we face our fears of being cast off, or dehumanized, or regarded as the source of contagion rather than as a holy image of God – Jesus teaches us that no matter how extreme our situation or anxiety become, God is always nearer to us than our very selves. God is with you. "So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit."

¹ <https://youtu.be/6o6ZzBULLAs>

² Matthew Boulton, "Gospel: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for 2 Lent," *SALT*, 2 March 2020. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/3/2/gospel-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-2>

³ *Ibid.*