

Sermon: For God So Love the World

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 5, 2023)

I've never been to Salvation Mountain, a black-and-white photo of it is on the cover of today's bulletin, and I am making a mental note to visit the site one day. It is a tourist attraction, an impressive monument, of 50 foot height and 150 foot breath, made entirely of adobe clay, straws and lots and lots of donated paint. The site is located just outside of Niland, California, on an arid stretch of desert not too far from the border to Mexico. It's creator, folk artist Leonard Knight, spent almost 30 years building and working on that colourful mountain. From the Sea of Galilee at the bottom, to the big red heart in the middle containing words of a prayer of repentance, to the cross at the very top signifying the sacrifice of Christ, Salvation Mountain is Leonard Knight's shout out to the world that 'God is Love'.

Love is the reoccurring theme on this man-made mountain, it is embodied in every painted flower and tree, it is represented in every sculpted doves and fruit. Every inch of this mountain expresses its maker's experience with the living God, that God is love.

I am fascinated by this man, who had since passed away in 2014, and the site is now being maintained by a team of volunteers. I am fascinated because I want to know what prompted him to go to that extent, to proclaim the love of God in such a public way. I want to know what drove him, what sustained him, and perhaps how I could be more like him.

The Gospel reading today portrays a very different man, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews who came to Jesus by night. Now, such was a man in a crisis of faith. He was not content with his own tradition. Deep down inside he had sensed that something was off, something just did not add up.

Nicodemus was curious of what Jesus had to offer, but he did not want others to know about his curiosity. Perhaps out of guilt, perhaps out of shame, or perhaps just out of wanting to maintain his public prestige, his public office as a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of Judaism. So, Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. He was respectful enough with his opening statement, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person."

But Jesus knew right away what Nicodemus was truly after, so cutting to the chase, Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Ah, kingdom of God, that was his aim, his pursuit, his reason for approaching Jesus. Nicodemus had wanted to have a glimpse of that kingdom, where God’s justice is upheld, where God’s righteousness is the norm, a kingdom where God reigns supreme here on earth, as it is in heaven.

Note the adjective ‘from above’, or *anóthen* in Greek, has multiple means including from heaven, from the beginning, from of old, or again and anew. The King James Version has it translated as ‘born again’, that is where we get the phrase of ‘born again Christians’, ever so popular in the evangelical circle. Note it is to such a meaning that Nicodemus leaned towards as he provocatively challenged Jesus, saying, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born (again)?”

Good question? Not really. This sly Pharisee ought to have known that Jesus was not talking about being born of mother’s womb, a second time—an impossible feat, a silly pun. Whenever I come across Nicodemus’ silly question, I can’t help to think of a story I once read.

A wide-eye three year old was witnessing her mother giving birth at their home, an all-too-soon delivery performed by a paramedic. As the newborn came out of the womb, he was not breathing, no cry was heard. So the paramedic held up the baby by the feet, and gave him a few whacks on the buttock. Sure enough, the baby started to cry. Out of curiosity, the paramedic asked the three year old what she thought was happening. The little girl replied, “Spank him again! The baby shouldn’t have crawled in there, in the first place!”

I know, silly. That’s how I picture Nicodemus asking that question. However, Jesus was not deterred, he went on to explain calmly, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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.”

The ‘born from above’ that Jesus spoke of is the kind of birth when the first humankind was breathed with the breath of God. It is the kind of birth when one is thoroughly washed, drenched, and filled with the Spirit of

God. It is by such a Spirit, that one is truly and fully alive. I won't pretend to fully understand what being born of the Spirit really is, as the Spirit goes where it chooses, and who can really discern its path, its purpose. So permit me to echo Nicodemus' amazement in saying, "How can these things be?" But I will say what comes after that exchange provides us with four separate yet inter-related truth statements that is worthy of our attention.

In verse 13, "*No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*" As it turns out, Nicodemus did not approach Jesus, it was Jesus who first approach him, approaching all of us. It was Jesus, the Word becoming flesh, who first chose to dwell amongst us, to pitch his tent in our own backyard. It is Jesus the living Christ, who still is in our midst, who still is seeking us, seeking to connect with us.

For what purpose, you ask? The following verse explains, "*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*" The reference to Moses lifted up the serpent harkens back to the story in Numbers 21, when the Israelites were dying by the scores from poisonous snakes as the punishment for their sin of insolence and disobedience. When they prayed to God for deliverance, God instructed Moses to make a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole. Whosoever was bitten by a serpent, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

It is a very strange story, indeed. But the point that Jesus was making is that humanity was and is in the state of sinfulness, individually and collectively. We have all been fooled in believing that our current existence is fine, we are fine, and we will make it out, just fine. When in fact, our state of sinfulness can only lead to one outcome, that is death, unless we look up to the Son of Man who is lifted up, and whosoever believes in him may have life, abundant, fulfilled and eternal.

Then in the next sentence, verse 16, we come to see the true measure of the heart of God, "*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.*" New Testament scholar John Meier made an interesting observation, on the Greek syntax of the phrase 'For God so loved the world'. He notes the original placement in Greek, 'for so loved God the world', places God right next to world, or *cosmos*. The point being that, improbable as it sounds, God truly loves the world with such ferocity that

God draws near to save, even to dwell among us in the flesh. “When God loves,” says Meier, “things happen: great things, terrible things, incarnation and cross.”

Finally, in verse 17, Jesus concludes with this statement, “*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.*” There you have it, God is love, and the love of God is fully expressed by God the Father sending the Son to us. This act of self-sacrifice finds its ultimate expression through the cross, that the world might be saved through him, through Christ Jesus lifted up on the cross.

I wish the world has more people like Leonard Knight, who is unconfused, who is not afraid to shout from a mountain top, even from one he had painstakingly built and sculpted, that ‘God is love’. However, I suspect that most of us are more like Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus by night, who looks at this faith business and exclaims “How can these things be?”

I don’t want to give Nicodemus too hard of a time, because he did turn things around. As Thomas Long, the respected author and preacher noted, in the article published by the Christian Century magazine in 2018, “when all is said and done, Nicodemus finally becomes the mirror image of Judas. At the beginning, Judas is called into the light, but in the end, the betrayer slips into the night. At the beginning, Nicodemus comes by night, but he finally moves, however hesitantly, toward the light, the word become flesh. Somehow it is fitting, then, that the last glimpse we have of Nicodemus is not finding him in the company of scholars opining about spiritual truths but in the cemetery with a lavish amount of spice, caring tenderly and lovingly for the body of the Savior who came in the flesh to rescue him.”

A truly loving response to the love of God.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.