

Children

People are born physically of human parents, but they are born spiritually of the Spirit.

Good morning, boys and girls. How many of you know when your birthday is? (Wait for show of hands.) When is it? (Go around the group and let them tell you when their birthdays are.) How old are you going to be on your next birthday? (Let them tell you.) Can anyone tell me what having a birthday means? (Choose someone to tell you.) Oh, it means getting presents! It means you have lived another whole year. I think you forgot something. It means that you were born. It means you have a mother and a father and you were born. The word "birthday" means "the day of your birth" or the day you were born. I brought a birthday party invitation with me today, but it's not for this birthday that we all celebrate every year on the day we were born. It's for your other birthday. Did you know you have another birthday? (Let them respond.) Two birthdays! Some people as they get older don't even like to have one birthday! What are they going to do with two birthdays! Let's look and see when the party is. (Open the invitation and read it. Yours may differ slightly.) Let's see who it's for. It says you! When is it? It has a question mark. Where is it? It has another question mark. What time is it? It has another question mark! This party is for YOU but we don't know where, or when or what time! Let's read some more. How old? It says born of the spirit. I wonder what that means.

Let's read our lesson today and see if there's a clue. (Read verses 1-8 of the lesson.) Oh, now I see! Jesus says we have human parents. That's our birthday that we usually celebrate every year with a cake and candles and presents. That's one birthday. Then we are born of the Spirit and that's our other birthday. How can we be born of the Spirit? I think we might be born of the Spirit at our baptism. Or it might be at our confirmation, or it might never happen on a special day. It might happen so gradually that you won't ever be able to point to a special day and say, "That's the one!" But when it does, you'll know. Because being born of the Spirit gives you a special feeling. It's a feeling that God loves you and you love God and you feel special. If you already have the feeling, then you are born of the Spirit!

I

That which bites you can also heal you. God's ultimate promise is to heal an ailing creation. Yet there is no healing without hurting. To experience God's salvation, we must first experience "sinsation." The very word, "salvation" comes from the word "salve" meaning health. In Jesus' salvation, God restores his sin-sick creation to perfect health. He does so by first embracing death.

What the first "Adam" spoiled, Jesus, the "second Adam" will heal. The first Adam in his soiling of God's perfect environment essentially inaugurated time, space, aging, and an expiration date for all things, organic and inorganic.

Jesus, the second Adam, will restore the world and reverse death and erosion, offering a gift of eternal life and eternal kingdom with his gift of redemption and salvation.

If the first human was "Adam Transient," Jesus shines forth as "Adam Eternal."

This configuration of opposites: dark and light, death and life, sin and salve, change and permanence, mortality and eternity, even humanity and divinity pervade the story of the gospels, as well as the earlier Hebrew scriptures.

Darkness can be changed by the presence of Light. Venom can be eviscerated by Venerative Vision, as we see in the story of Moses' bronze serpent. Sin can be altered by the presence of Salvation. God can reverse what the human Adam had done by becoming human and changing it back. Everything has its converse. Everything in existence is both dialogic and reversible.

This conversant dialogue is evident from the beginning of time, as God voices everything into Being, and into relationship. Things appear because of a vibration of opposites.^[1] If something throws another thing off kilter, something else must act as a corrective. The universe is a relational balancing act. We understand it in physics. And we understand it in scripture. In this sense, science and religion are not only also dialogic but brilliantly linked.

The prophecy of the coming messiah therefore had to become true. And the dichotomy of the Living God/Living Human Jesus needed to be the kind of Messiah who could undo our current reality caused by our will to see, know, control, and be through His own descent into darkness and the chaos of death. We achieve life through death, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus about being "born again."

Want to be a true Christian? You must be willing to undergo "soul sacrifice," to allow God to operate on your heart, jumpstart your spirit, and point it in a new trajectory. We say it all the time. The scriptures tell us this. You need to "be changed" to be a true follower of Jesus. You must "die to self" in order to experience eternal life. You must be willing to take up your cross and follow Jesus if you want to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

This "dialogue of opposites" defines our faith.

But do we really believe it? And will we really adhere to it? Will you allow Jesus, the Surgeon of Hearts, to operate on you?

It's a risk few of us truly want to take. Cause we like things the way they are.

This is the real sin of the human spirit, the truth that keeps us from God's truth.

If the world is in motion, then sin is stasis. And we as a people love, love, love stasis.

Our scriptures for today give us a taste of how difficult it is for humans to trust God and put our lives into Jesus' hands. Let's read it again.

"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."

"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."

"This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

We are a people who love darkness, who love to hide, as Adam and Eve did the first time God sought them after they had eaten of the forbidden tree. We are afraid of being seen. Afraid of being authentic. Afraid of being vulnerable. Afraid of Truth and exposing the untruths within ourselves, even if it means we can be healed. We are a people who love the status quo.

But those who step into the light, who are unashamed to be seen in all of their weakness, illness, sinfulness, incompleteness, will in turn be healed by God, saved by Jesus, restored, and made whole.

To follow Jesus is to do the exact opposite of what our humanness might cause us to want to do –to hide ourselves, to keep things the way they are, to seek security in stasis, to avoid risk. And yet by avoiding risk, we take the greatest risk of all –we risk our very lives, and condemn ourselves to an eternity of darkness, sin, and ultimate death.

One of the most brilliant minds in economics, Joseph Schumpeter, realized that all great innovations emerge from the destruction of old systems. He called his principle, "creative destruction." To create anew for the future, you must first eliminate that which holds you in stasis to the present.

The gospel gives us this same message. When we truly put our faith in Jesus, we allow him to remake us new. We ask him to help us sacrifice our current "self" in hope that he will reconstruct us into a new Being, a saved, whole, healthy, restored Human Being, a Human Being made in God's image.

If anything, this needs to be our focus in this time of Lent. For as Jesus in God's own self-sacrificial act moves closer and closer to the cross, to embrace death so that he can re-create life, we too are asked to take up a cross and follow him there.

Lent is time when we think of ourselves in darkness but commit ourselves to moving into the Light. It's a time of ultimate repentance. It's a time of supreme commitment, trust, faith, and hope in an unseen future, an eternal tomorrow.

Because we know that the moment when we appear to sacrifice our freedom, that's the moment we begin to be truly freed through the gift of Jesus.

Our God is a God who exists in a universe of opposites.

Want to live? You must first die.

Want to be saved? You must first realize you are ill.

Want to follow Jesus into the eternal kingdom? You must first take up your cross and follow him into the pit.

As Christians we already know the secret of this trajectory.

And as Lent moves closer and closer to Easter morning, you know more and more surely that death always results in Life. This is the Law of the Serpent.

As this Lenten season continues to unfold, may God bless you in your dying and welcome you in your living.

[1] See www.physicsclassroom.com and Hans Andeweg, "Everything is Energy, Everything is One, Everything is Possible," April 21, 2016, www.turnerpublishing.com. ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., , by Lori Wagner

II

Sue Monk Kidd was pregnant with her second child. Her three-year-old son, Bob, was afraid of the dark. Sue tried everything. She tried leaving a light on in the hall and a night-light on in Bob's room. Nothing she did helped; he was still scared of the dark and would cry out in the middle of the night. One night as she held him against her to comfort him, he touched her round abdomen. Little Bob 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," his loving mother replied, "it's dark in there."

As Bob thought further he asked, "He doesn't even have a night-light, does he?"

"No," Sue responded, "not even a night-light."

Then Bob hugged his mother as she patted his head. Bob had one more question for this mother that night, "Do you think my brother is scared all by himself in there?"

"I don't think so," Sue explained, "because he's not really alone. He's inside of me," It was a very special moment between mother and son. Suddenly Sue had an inspiration. "And it's the same way with you." Sue explained to her son. "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."

Sue remembers looking into her son's eyes, wondering if he understood what she meant. Having nothing else to say, Bob went back to bed and was soon asleep. That was the last time he woke up during the night scared. (1)

Children aren't the only ones who are afraid when night falls. There was once a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a high-ranking member of the Pharisees but he was confused and frightened. Nothing was making sense to him. The more he struggled to understand, the more confused and frightened he became. Then he heard about Jesus, and he thought that perhaps Jesus could help him. Under the cover of darkness Nicodemus set out to find this itinerant teacher. He caught up with Jesus on the outskirts of town.

Unfortunately Jesus wasn't much help. At one point in their conversation Jesus tells Nicodemus, "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?" Nicodemus asks. "Can he go back into his mother's womb?" Nicodemus was confused. Jesus simply wasn't making any sense.

Then Jesus reminded Nicodemus of the time Moses and the children of Israel were in

the desert. Certainly Nicodemus, a high-ranking Pharisee would understand an illustration from the pages of the Torah. Out in the desert some of the people of Israel were being bitten by snakes. In fact some of the Israelites had died as a result of snake bites. It was such a problem that Moses sought out God for a solution.

God instructed Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." Moses did as God had instructed him. He placed a snake high on a pole. When the people looked at the snake they were healed. They no longer even feared snakes. Nicodemus remembered the story Jesus was referring to. In the same way, Jesus tells Nicodemus, people will one day look to the cross and live. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," says Jesus, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

LOOK TO THE CROSS.

That was Jesus' advice to Nicodemus as understood by the early church. 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 luck " 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 dark night of the soul, look to the cross.

That was a discovery that Harry Teuchert made. For years Harry had been a successful publisher of anniversary books. He also sold specialized advertising and promotional materials to churches. Everything in his life seemed to be perfect. A lovely home, a family, a solid future; but all this suddenly collapsed. His wife informed him she was leaving him. She was in love with someone else.

Devastated, he tried to cope, work, continue with his life, but this tragedy was too overwhelming. A few days after his wife was gone, he began to reflect upon his life. His marriage was ending in divorce. He must have been at fault somewhere. Where had it gone wrong? Despite all the other positives he had going for him, he felt himself to be a complete failure with nothing for which to live.

He was on the road traveling to a church for a meeting with an anniversary committee to explain the layout for their publication. Arriving early on a hot summer day, he went into the church and sat down in the fellowship hall, which was in the basement and was cooler than the rest of the church.

Suddenly, he began to contemplate suicide. His life was over. All was finished. As he sat at a table, he began to cry intensely, holding his head in his hands. The more he wept, the more he was convinced that his life had ended. He would continue no more. He was beaten. It would be so easy to end it all. As he looked up, in total despair, he

noticed a faded poster on the far wall. Depicted was the image of a man, in that same total despair he was experiencing, head in hands and in complete anguish. As he studied the poster further, he noticed a smaller image in the lower right corner of the poster. Portrayed were three small crosses, on a hill, surrounded by an ashen sky. Beneath the center cross these simple words were inscribed, "I know how you feel, I've been there myself."

While staring at these words, Harry fell to his knees and prayed, "God help me." Suddenly Harry felt the power of the Holy Spirit inundate his entire being. He rose and promised himself, "I'm going to beat this thing. I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me." After that prayer Harry got on with his life and never looked back. Today he is a pastor, serving the God who came to him in his moment of greatest trial.

Are you in pain this morning? Like Harry Teuchert? Like Nicodemus? Look to the cross. Draw your strength from Christ. Jesus is saying to you this morning, "I know how you feel. I've been there myself." Look to the cross. That is our first word for the morning. The second has to do with what we find on that cross.

AT THE CROSS WE ENCOUNTER LOVE IN ITS PUREST FORM.

The story of Nicodemus 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 hurting Nicodemus that Jesus spoke these words from John's Gospel that we all love so well: "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." God so loved the world.... Jesus was trying to move Nicodemus from a life of law to a life of love. He was trying to impress on Nicodemus the extravagance of God's grace. He was trying to tell Nicodemus that God's devotion to His children is beyond measure. It is love in its purest form.

There is a story that comes out of the Bedouin culture. "Bedouin" is the Aramaic name for "desert dwellers." These people live much as the characters of the Old Testament did. During a heated argument, according to this story, a young Bedouin struck and killed a friend of his. Knowing 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 in order to seek his protection. The old chief took the young Arab in. The chief assured 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. They would see that justice would prevail in their own way. "But I have given my word," protested the chief.

"But you don't know whom he killed!" they countered.

"I have given my word," the chief repeated.

"He killed your son!" one of them blurted out. The chief was deeply and visibly shaken with his news. He stood speechless with his head bowed for a long time. The accused and the accusers as well as curious onlookers waited breathlessly. What would happen to the young man? Finally the old man raised his head. "Then he shall become my son," he informed them, "and everything I have will one day be his." (2)

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 agape " the love of God. Look to the cross. At the cross we encounter love in its purest form. And one thing more.

IN THE CROSS WE FIND HEALING AND LIFE.

Billy Graham tells of meeting a young man at one of his crusades who was confined to a wheelchair. The young man was suffering in the last stages of terminal cancer. It was a dark night of the soul for the young man. He was filled with anger and bitterness. He had read too many books promising health to believers. He had met too many well-meaning Christians who had promised him a miraculous healing from his disease. As he continued to get sicker and sicker, he grew more and more uncertain.

His parents loved him dearly and took him to one faith healer after another. Each one prayed for his dramatic healing. The young man had prayed and fasted, he sincerely believed in Jesus but nothing happened. Instead he was dying. Graham's crusade was the last meeting the young man would ever attend. At the crusade that night there was a youth emphasis. The speaker was Joni Eareckson Tada. Many of you know her story. At the age of 17 Joni was paralyzed in a diving accident. She too had prayed for healing. Yet she remained confined to a wheelchair as a quadriplegic. Sitting there in that wheelchair Joni spoke from her heart, confessing her early anger at remaining crippled after praying and believing a miracle would occur. But a miracle did take place in her life, though not the one she had been praying for. Instead God met her in her pain and gave her life new meaning and a new direction in spite of her suffering and disappointment.

Joni's honesty set that dying young man free. He was able to let go of his bitterness and anger. He stopped seeing himself as one who did not have enough faith. Instead he came to see Christ in a new way. Not long after that crusade the young man died, "but his parents were able to rejoice," Dr. Graham says because, "he had not died angry and bitter. He simply gave his life back to his loving Father by giving himself completely to Jesus Christ." (3) He was set free from his dark night of the soul and experienced new

life.

Look to the cross. See there love in its purest form. See there healing and life. When we look to the cross we discover a God who loves and cares deeply for each of us " a God who carries each of us near His heart.

Sue Monk Kidd said it well to her three-year-old son Bobby. "I carry you inside me too. Right here in my heart." So it is with God. "First God was only `up there'" explains Sue Monk Kidd. "Then God was `all around.' Next I began to see that God was also `within me.' And now, most shocking of all," Sue says, "I was finding that I am and always was `within God.'" (4)

1. WHEN THE HEART WAITS. Sue Monk Kidd. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990, p. 149.

2. LEGACY OF A PACK RAT. Ruth Bell Graham. Nashville: Oliver-Nelson Books, 1989, pp. 125-126.

3. STORM WARNING. Billy Graham. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992, pp. 28-29.

4. Sue Monk Kidd, op. cit.