FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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March 10, 2024

*Still S/he Persists* Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

 John 3:14-21

*God’s steadfast love endures forever.* [Ps. 107:1b] and

*“For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* [John 3:16]

If there is only one verse from the Bible—one verse from the story of God and human beings—that we remember, let it be one or the other of these. In fact, if you are feeling generous with yourself *and God*, you might want to commit yourself to remembering *both*!

*You are loved. We are loved.* No matter what happens, God persists in God’s love for us, in God’s desire that we should live and thrive. Think about what more we all could accomplish—individually but also collectively—if we could take to heart the love communicated to us in these two verses; the love communicated to us throughout the Bible, and especially through its story of the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus?

In the psalm we sang this morning, in the very first verses of Psalm 107, the psalmist begins with this declaration about God’s faithfulness and love. What is amazing and helpful is that it also provides us with a remedy for our forgetfulness: “*Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those God redeemed from trouble.”* [v. 2] “Count your blessings”—that is one way to put it, but it is much more than that.

To remember the ways in which God has “redeemed” us from trouble allows us to do at least two things. First, it asks us to remember that God’s love brings wholeness to those places in our lives that are broken. Which is to say: we are not alone; God is watching and present. God is persistent. Hope is possible.

Second, to remember God’s love and presence in our lives is also an important way of cultivating humility. If we are not alone, then we do not have to *do* everything alone either. We can depend on the love and care of God as it comes to us through the gestures of care and love from those around us. We can accept the assistance of others without feeling diminished or helpless. In fact, we can accept gestures of support and care from others as yet another affirmation of God’s presence in our lives: care, generosity, love.

As we go along in the psalm, the writer reiterates this thought by reminding us how the people*, “cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God saved them from their distress; God sent out God’s word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction.”* [19-20]

So, this is not an unmovable God. Our distress, our suffering initiates a response from the heart of God. God is moved and reaches out to heal and to restore. Even in the face of human faithlessness, God persists in responding to us with love and healing.

In the passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus references a particular account of human faithlessness and divine healing. In the very first line of the passage we heard, Jesus says: *And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.* [v. 14] Did you catch that?

Jesus is remembering and referring to a rather strange story in the life of God and the people. He is remembering the story in the Book of Numbers of the Hebrew people as they were wandering in the desert, making their way towards the “Promised Land.”

Along the way, they get tired and irritable. They begin to complain about the food and the conditions; they accuse Moses of bringing them out into the desert to die. Of course, God hears them, hears their grumbling and their moaning. And in response, this time, God sends a brood of snakes that move among the people biting and killing them.

Realizing their sinful ingratitude, they go to Moses who asks God for forgiveness for them. And God’s remedy is this:

*“Make a poisonousserpent* [of bronze]*, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.* [Numbers 21:8-9]

Imagine that!—a remedy that requires that we focus on an image of the very thing that caused the pain and suffering. How strange! And yet, how obvious, as Jesus tells Nicodemus he must also be “lifted up.” This foreshadows what will happen to Jesus very soon. He too will be lifted up—literally but also figuratively—and we, too, will forever afterwards, look to the instrument of his torture as our source of comfort and God’s continuing promise of steadfast love. Indeed, the cross of Christ says to us that God can and will have the last word when it comes everything in the world, not the least of which is our welfare.

In this way, God redeemed the cross—redefined it. In redefining what the cross stood for—which was torture, but also domination, cruelty, injustice, and death—God gave the cross its new identity as our source of life. The cross that was meant to shame and brutalize, that was meant to control and subjugate became our symbol of God’s desire for us to know freedom, compassion, and justice.

And we are meant to have this certainty in divine love and hope even in the face of continued human injustice and violence. In the face of all that we do to diminish or dehumanize others, God persists in raising up the strength of God’s love for us and among us. In the face of the way in which we condemn others and demonize them and consigning them to the outer reaches of our compassion and notice, God insists on turning us toward the cross of Christ whom the people in his own time insisted was proof of his criminality and well-earned execution.

This is what Jesus was trying to communicate to Nicodemus, to whom he was speaking in the passage we heard. Nicodemus very much wanted to understand what Jesus was saying. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was supposed to be a teacher and a scholar. He was also supposed to be above paying any attention to passing rabbis from the lower classes, like Jesus. And so, it was an amazing thing for him to seek out Jesus and speak to him the way he did.

What the passage did not tell us, but what you may remember, is that although Nicodemus really wanted to hear what Jesus had to say, he came to see him at night, under the cover of darkness so that no one would see or know. He could not engage Jesus out in the open in the light of day lest he be judged.

Nicodemus humbled himself enough to seek out Jesus and speak to him, but he could not understand the whole of Jesus’ message—that God’s steadfast love is also a love that embraces far more than Nicodemus could acknowledge and could accept at that time in his life.

*Humility.* Humility is the theme we keep returning to in this story of Christ and our relationship with God. Despite our long history with God, our relationship is always one in which human beings have difficulty accepting the generosity and love of God. We are too proud that is the long and short of it. We are too proud to acknowledge and receive God’s love. Even when we see something amazing and life-giving and want to draw close to it instead of running, we painfully inch our way towards it—that is: towards God—and usually, under the cover of our own darkness.

However, we are still a most fortunate people because God persists in God’s love for us. God keeps showing us love and compassion. It is all around us. Humility is the door through which it enters our lives.

After describing some of the various theological theories one preacher, John Buchanan, preaching at Fourth Presbyterian Church, in Chicago, in 2001 had this to say about the whole thing:

*“…that love of God, incarnate, that man going humbly to his cross, that man who chooses deliberately not to claim the kind of power and privilege that you and I live for—that man is the truest human being who ever lived and that insofar as you and I live like that, even occasionally, we approach something of the meaning and purpose and glory for which we were created.*

*I’m not sure we can or ever will understand, but I know I believe that love, which gave life away, is the best thing anyone ever did for me and for you—and that it is our final safety, our security, our salvation, and our freedom.”*

That is the long and the short of it: that God’s love is revealed to us in the kind of persistence that sees our suffering, *and* sees our faithlessness—that sees all that we are—and still holds out the hand of love and caring to us. Indeed, God’s love calls us into the light so that we may see fully our own, *and* each other’s suffering, so that we may receive caring, and so that we may care for one another in God’s name—so that we may be the means for God’s love to go forth in the life of all of humanity and creation.

Even though Jesus acknowledges that we prefer hiding away from seeing ourselves and each other clearly, his promise is that *“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* [v. 21]

So, we need not be afraid of drawing close, or drawing out and being seen because God’s love will come to heal and make us whole. We need not be afraid of drawing close and clearly seeing the suffering all around us because God’s love is persistent and will show us our part in caring for those who are hurting, who are hungry, who are lost.

Consider that, my friends, hold it in your prayers as you listen to the cares of the world filter through your consciousness, as you process your own needs. Allow *that* reality to give you courage and the desire for justice and peace in your life, and in the world around us.

Most of all, go forward in your life knowing that you are not alone. You go carrying within you the love of God which is persistent and good. Amen.