

St James United Church

Message for March 5, 2023

The Second Sunday in Lent

“Ascent and Descent”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft



Readings: Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17; Louise Glück, “Descent to the Valley”

Last week we began Lent with an invitation from Jesus to come and see where he abides. Well, today we hear someone other than John the Baptist’s disciples do that as Nicodemus comes to see Jesus. We mostly know this story of their meeting through one line, John 3:16, often written on a sign and shown at sporting events. It’s a powerful statement about God’s love but as one citation gets treated like faith is transactional, that we need only say a particular prayer to be saved. But is that how it works? We mark Lent as a reminder that faith is more of a process. Like the citation, faith is part of a larger narrative, a part with the power to transform our lives.

We see this in the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes in the middle of the night, presumably trying to keep the visit secret. We’re told he’s a Pharisee and a leader in the Judean Council. As part of two elites, one religious, the other political, he has much to lose if people learn that he saw Jesus. The night visit suggests reluctance to let the meeting change him. Take his question about returning to the womb. He hears Jesus say we must be born again when this phrase just as well means born from above. You only get the nuance if you are willing to take the time to dialogue but Nicodemus seems stuck in only one understanding.

Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus because, like any of us, he was shaped by his culture, which though tracing its origin to Abraham and Sarah and rooted in Torah, was quite influenced by the Roman Empire. That world was very stratified with those on top holding a lot of power. Jesus’ words about ascending would have appealed to Nicodemus, but Jesus also spoke of needing to descend first, so Nicodemus went off into the night. It can be hard to take a different path than the one you are used to, something we see repeated in our history as a church. In many ways we focused on an upward trajectory, missed how it must be preceded by descent, or claimed that Jesus had done that for us. And so we sought to ascend, first by emulating the Roman hierarchy, then made faith about moral perfection, promoted hard work as an ethical imperative, and most recently promised health, wealth and status as a consequence of our faith. Through all of this the goal became not a more just world but a future heaven, possible as long as we believe in Jesus.

We mirrored the culture rather than challenged it, and so ascent is still our culture’s main goal. It’s a pull I find hard to shake. I feel it in pangs of jealousy at someone who’s better off, has a fancier car, a bigger house, a fatter paycheque. The message we hear is that success will make us feel fulfilled. The irony is that the messaging depends on judgement, undermining our self-worth so we’re somehow left feeling both lesser than some and better than others. And it

all has one aim, for us to accumulate more. Of course, only a few make it to the top and so for most of us the climb is futile, a feeling expressed in the poem I shared at the start of worship. Fortunately, that's not where it ends. The poet discovers that the descent not the climb offers the life she seeks.

This is a wisdom at the heart of our theology and offers an antidote to the pull of our culture. Paul held this up in his letter to the Philippians, inviting us to take on the mind of Christ who didn't hold tightly to divinity but instead let go of everything to become one of us, even accepted death on the cross. Paul wants us to know that faith is about the cross, not just in what Jesus did for us but in our willingness to embrace the same descending path. As we do, we move beyond transaction to a true transformation of our hearts. As we consciously let go of the need to be ever better, we discover that God is with us, not despite our messy lives but in them. Rather than before us as a goal when we're strong or if we succeed, God is present in our weakness, as we let down our guard, loving us not for who our culture wants us to be, but as we are. Now it's not easy to let down our guard. Instead, we're often forced to in a crisis, a job loss, relationship breakdown, a serious illness, the death of a loved one, but in that moment we often experience a strength and presence we didn't know we had, God loving us not for what we own, how we look, or the power we have, all things we're eventually stripped of, but that we're loved just as we are, right now. And surprisingly in the process of knowing we're loved, we actually begin to love more, to gratuitously mirror God's love to others, inviting them to love more, and so we are both blessed and become a blessing to others.

This is liberating, and thankfully not only something we may experience in difficulties. We have a season like Lent to intentionally focus on the downward path, to draw us closer to Jesus in this through prayer, fasting, generosity, each in their own way inviting us to let go of ourselves and to look to God. In prayer, especially in various forms of meditation, we step away from distraction, from our constant thoughts and turn to God at our centre. And even if we end up distracted by our thoughts, as we refocus we remember that God is in our thoughts, and our lives. Fasting does the same, our physical hunger is a reminder of who we truly seek. Every time we crave what we have given up, the pang pulls us to God. And in generosity, we extend that for others, choosing to give to someone who needs it, to let go rather than hold on. Again, we shift out of self-focus and focus on others. Each practice invites us to descend rather than ascend, a dying to self where we discover renewed life.

Beloved, as I share this, it sounds easy but of course it's not. It's a lifetime of moving against the current of our culture, taking time for prayer, embracing seasons like this one to intentionally rest in the gift of God's love rather than always needing to prove ourselves. If it were easy we'd only need to say a prayer, and all would be right with our soul. But faith is more than that. Faith is a journey that slowly changes us. It ultimately changed Nicodemus. At the end of Jesus' life, he came into the open as a disciple. Perhaps at the cross he finally understood that the descending path is what promises real transformation in our lives. So let us take that path. Jesus as the Crucified but Risen One will meet us there, loving us as we are, offering the gift that can transform our lives. Amen.