

Nativity Lutheran Church
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
March 11, 2018

Fourth Sunday in Lent
The Holy Gospel: St. John 3:14-21
Theme: "Nails-in-the-Pocket" Living

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But 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."

+ + +

In Nomine Jesu

I'll bet that you do too, if you're anywhere close to or over thirty years of age. How could we not. What I remember is a remote, almost antiseptic feeling – I guess that's because it was at a distance. I watched that whirling white dervish of a cloud mass on our TV. We'd hurried home from a vacation because, early on, there was some fear that a northern track would carry it our way. But as I watched the track turn I felt – I confess – relief. That whirling dervish was passing well south. It wouldn't hit Tampa where we lived. Wouldn't hit me, my family, my home. That was Hurricane Andrew ... my first encounter with what some called a 1 in a hundred year storm.

I put that in the same category I put what I thought about suffering from gout when my Grandma complained about her awful attacks of it. Little kid that I was, I thought she was faking. Until ... well, I was leading a retreat at a congregation in Boca Raton focused on Christian Stewardship one Saturday when ... BAM! ...I got pain in my big toe that was enough to knock me off my feet. Almost literally! I got taken to the ER, figuring I had some exotic disease or life-threatening problem, when the doc came in and – almost smiling – said, "You've got gout!" And the only image I had in my mind was my dear Grandma Lugie relaxing in heaven in a rocker recliner I'm looking forward to with a big smile on her face and a finger pointed at me saying, "Faking, eh? Gotcha!"

That's the way it is with "hundred year storms." You would think that after Andrew we could breathe easy for a century, eh? I see another face from

heaven chuckling at me, with finger wagging, and another "Gotcha." Why? Well we experienced more since then. In 2017 alone we had two of them in the Southeast US. And we thought Andrew was as bad as it got. Sandy they called a 1 in 700 year storm. They called the February floods in California 1 in 450 years storms. That was only 81 years ago. And Irene? That's been since Andrew. And then there's the Boston Marathon Nor'Easter of 2007 ... worst weather for that part of the country in 110 year history of that event. But this month's two [maybe three] Nor'Easters in less than two weeks have folk in the eastern seaboard flood zones forgetting all about 2007.

My point? Not how bad things can get, but how unrealistic our estimates usually are about how bad things are compared to how bad they can get when we find ourselves in a storm.

That reality, I make bold to submit, is a lot unlike – in fact it's the exact opposite of – the way you and I experience the season of Lent after all the years we've kept it. We're four weeks into it for this year. After how many years? Contemplating and preparing to relive in liturgy the death of Jesus. There's something of that same remote, antiseptic feeling I had from a distance watching Andrew and about Lent. There's something distant about it. And the distance is real. A couple thousand years real.

And the story is so familiar it may well have become – ought we confess it? – a bit of a monotony. Repeated, relentlessly – if we're lucky – week after week. It's gruesome, deadly details dulled by the repetition and the sameness. Jesus. Son of God. Son of Man. Word made flesh. Dead.

He dwelt among us. But hanging from Golgatha's cross he's dead. Suspended. Lifeless. There's something surreal about it by now. And it somehow seems disconnected from us when we think of it that way. Just another drama – another replay. Another death made not special by the media plays of so obscenely many countless others in our viewing experience.

Here's a hook for my point today. Pick up your bulletin, please, and look at the cover graphic. Took me a while to figure out what the nails and hammer were all about ... thought maybe it had to do with building an ark for the flood like Noah did. But ... I'm ashamed to admit ... it took me a while to get the connection with Jesus' cross. I was wondering why there were only three ... two hands, two feet need four, I thought.

But here's my take now. I think I'm still carrying the fourth one around in my hand or my pocket. And I think that Johannes Lehmann – the sceptic who wrote about Jesus [calling him "Rabbi J"] posed the thesis that history can't get us beyond "Rabbi J" to a real person.

He argued that all that the Gospel writers share is a selectively ideal story. And this idealized history is interpreted only by friendly writers in other New Testament books and the tradition and teaching of the church. And all of that leads Lehmann to the faith-challenging question of whether we can be sure that there is fact in the matter, a true man in the filtered story.

So here's today's question: "Just who is that Rabbi J?" Who is this Jesus of the Gospels? Who is the one we reflect upon today as we consider the passage ... **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."**?

Well, for one thing, Rabbi J was a real man. We can and must hang on to that fact. One of the earliest heresies of the church was to deny it. A fact not obscured by the evangelists. And faithful church theologians have not been guilty of making Jesus into some heavenly trickster who merely masqueraded as a human.

Jesus ... Rabbi J ... knew human burdens. Physical exhaustion. He came among us and followed the conditions of being human to their inevitable conclusion. He died. And he died alone – as all of us must finally experience death in our last breath.

It's very important for me to know that Jesus was a genuine human being. Only if I can be sure that he was a real person, can I understand how he can be with me in my sinning and in my suffering. He came in weakness, humility, and humanity. He stands with me in my humanness. He woos me instead of overpowering me. He wins me by his love, not by his dazzling authority.

So when I tell you that "Jesus loves you," I mean love of a deeply passionate kind. The kind only those who love deeply and fully ... think of true lovers ... can give and receive. And that passion gets real for me when I remember my thought that I'm still carrying around the fourth nail for Jesus' cross. Sobering, eh?

Or this. Someone here this morning ... count on it ... is losing his or her love. Before your very eyes, your loved one is dying and you can't do anything about it. Or the person you vowed to live with forever is slipping away from you. Maybe it's a parent. Horribly it may be a child ... yours, ours. If it helps, I know someone who loves you. Whose love for you can partly fill the empty place for now in your life and will do so completely before we can imagine.

Perhaps it's you who lost your job. Maybe thanks to financial corporate kinds of implosions or maybe "just because." It's like having the rug pulled out from

under you, or falling – maybe you’ve had this dream – down a bottomless hole. You’re anxious. You’re fearful. You don’t know where to turn. It’s easy for others not living through it to say that it’ll be a step toward something better. But you want to know what to do with nothing left to pay those mounting, escalating bills ... or the choice between medication or nourishment.

Is there a love that will never let you go? Ever? A love that can catch you when the bottom falls out? You know, better than I how Andrew’s swirling devastation and the storms that followed have lodged in our memories ... and how short they are in the light of the Sandys and Irma’s since then. And you’re here because you knew ... you hoped ... you trusted ... that there is that kind of love whatever the name of your personal storm may be. The one’s that feel like once in a lifetime ... or several lifetimes.

When you’ve simply had it, my dear sisters and brothers in Christ, when you’ve come to the end of your rope or when your own capacity to survive – let alone give or experience love – has been drained ... when your well is dry ... when you must face impossible decisions ... remember (as you alone know you can), that Jesus loves you. And that makes all the difference. Whatever the subject. He loves you. This I know. This we know. How? Because of who he is, this Rabbi J, this Jesus. The only eternally true and faithful lover of all of humankind.

John 3:16 is a verse that, because it’s so well known, might well have lost its power to convey it’s awesome meaning and message for us. And the subject with which it deals – salvation – has suffered [since we’ve gotten used to using the language of finance] a devaluation of purchasing power.

Yes, just about everyone who knows or has heard anything about Jesus or the Bible knows or remembers hearing John 3:16. But can anybody remember with whom Jesus is speaking when he concludes his conversation with “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son”? It isn’t, after all, a verse that is fenced off and standing alone. It has a context. It happened in a real life situation. The person Jesus is talking with is Nicodemus. And the two of them are talking about religion. Specifically they’re discussing how one is saved from all the destructive powers of sin and death.

This Nicodemus in our text ... or is he us? ... was one in the long line of humanity who has counted on his good deeds in anticipation of a just reward and tranquil eternity. His conversation with Jesus vividly shows the difference between the saving way of the Heavenly Father and the vast array of other means of seeking some final protection from temptation, death, and the devil that we can contrive or produce for ourselves. It’s part of the nail I – we - carry around.

Nicodemus is confused ... understandably so. There's no doubt in his mind that Jesus is a teacher sent from God. He really believed that "This country needs good rabbis. How else are we going to keep the law and further the purpose of God?" But what else is this he hears? "Unless one is born anew, one cannot see the kingdom." How is it possible to be born again? And what is this new theology? "Unless one is born of water and the spirit one cannot enter the kingdom." What's this all about, anyway?

Well here's the difference. For Nicodemus ... for way more of us than we'd like to imagine ... his idea of being saved depends on what he does ... what we do. He keeps the commandments – that's what they're there for, right? – and by living the obedient life he figures he furthers God's kingdom. But for Jesus, this salvation business isn't about what Nicodemus does ... or we do. Being saved in any real way is all about what God does, about the new life God gives, about the power and presence of the divine that God's Spirit activates in us. He's telling Nicodemus ... telling us ... that it's not the offering you burn or bring, the dances you do or the rituals you keep, the wagers or hope you gamble on, the religious rent you pay, the church charities you support. The action's with God ... not us.

So let's dive deep into Lent this year ... we're each Wednesday remembering one of God's cures to what folk experienced like their storms of a lifetime. Let's not gloss over ... let's plunge deep into the reason Lent is so helpful. Thinking about the nail we're still carrying around that was part of what nailed Jesus to that cross. Is there only one in my pocket, I wonder?

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, God loves you. You know that better than most who thought it all was lost in a storm ... a financial implosion ... a drought ... a flood ... a landslide. And we know it better than those who are convinced it might all be lost today.

We know that it's God who's at work! And like the wind, blowing in all of the world not announcing whence it came or whither it's going, that Spirit will lead your "there's still a nail in my pocket" lives to be and become more than you ever thought possible or can even imagined. Life as Christ's servants and disciples in the world that God loved so much that he sent his Son to give us and all who believe eternal life. Because of the nails, we know.

In the Name of Jesus!

AMEN!

+ + +

Soli Deo Gloria