

WHOEVER FINDS THIS – I LOVE YOU

Isaiah 53:1-6

John 3:12-18

Best-selling author Sue Monk Kidd tells of her three-year-old son who was afraid of the dark. She tried everything she knew to help little Bob overcome his fear. She tried leaving a light on in the hall; then a night-light 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 after she had become pregnant with her second child, Sue was holding little Bob to comfort him against the darkness. All at once he touched his mother's round abdomen and asked "Mama, is it dark inside there where my little brother is?"

"Yes," she replied, "it is dark in there."

Then little Bob observed, "He doesn't even have a night light, does he?"

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

The child hugged his mother and she patted his head. He had just one more question: "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. She said, "And, you know, it's the same way with you. 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, the child went back to bed and was soon fast asleep. And that was the last time he woke up afraid during the night.

Children aren't the only ones who are sometimes afraid when night falls. In the winter of 1970, I was serving as the Brigade Chaplain with what remained of the 24th Infantry Division near Saigon in Vietnam. During the day, I was able to put fear aside as I busied myself counseling, comforting and conducting worship services for my share of the more than 5,000 soldiers for whom our 5 brigade chaplains provided pastoral care and ministry. During the day, I could put fear aside, but, oh, the nights! I'd lie on my cot in my sleeping bag trying not to hear the artillery shells whistling overhead from US and ARVN soldiers in one direction and from the Vietcong in the other. There wasn't a lot of danger that our positions would be overrun – that's what the artillery was for: to keep the bad guys away. But a short round landing on top of us – that was always a possibility. And I couldn't put it out of my mind. It isn't really to my credit that I did more and better praying than I've been able to do before or since.

Prayer ... lots of prayer. And then I found Psalm 4:8. I'd read it a dozen times before, but now it became personal. "I will lie down in peace and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety." I'd say it over and over – like a mantra. And at last, I would fall asleep.

Children, I say, aren't the only ones who are afraid when night falls. There was that man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a high-ranking member of the Pharisees, but he was confused and undoubtedly afraid. Nothing was making any sense to him. The more he struggled to understand things, 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 he set out to find this itinerant teacher.

At first blush, it would seem that Jesus wasn't much help to him. At one point in their conversation, Jesus told Nicodemus, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again." Jesus was speaking, of course, of spiritual rebirth, but Nicodemus could only think of physical birth. "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Nicodemus asks. "How can he go back into his mother's womb?" Nicodemus was confused and, I think, irritated. I suppose a paraphrase of what he said to Jesus would go something like this: "I really want to take you seriously, but this is ridiculous. Tell me what I'm missing here."

Then Jesus reminded Nicodemus of the time when Moses and the children of Israel were in the desert. Certainly a Pharisee scholar like Nicodemus would understand an illustration from the pages of

the Torah. Some of the people of Israel had been bitten by snakes while walking through the desert. In fact, some of them had died as a result of snake bites. It was such a problem that Moses sought out God for a solution.

God instructed Moses, “Fashion a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; then everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” Moses did as God had instructed him. He placed the image of a snake high on a pole. And when the people looked at the snake, they were healed. 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.” Do you see what Jesus was saying? In the moments when fear seems to get the better of us – when the light at the end of the tunnel looks like an oncoming train – when the only luck we’re having 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 experience our own “dark night of the soul”, look to the cross.

And what do we find when we look there? At the cross WE ENCOUNTER LOVE IN ITS PUREST FORM. The story of Nicodemus doesn’t end with the lesson of the serpent in the wilderness. Jesus has a message for Nicodemus, and for us as well. It was to the fearful Nicodemus that Jesus spoke those transforming words from John’s Gospel that we all love so much. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” God so loved the world ... and everyone IN the world: Nicodemus ... you ... me! Jesus was trying to move Nicodemus from a life of law to a life of love. He was trying to impress the abundance of God’s grace on Nicodemus. He was trying to tell Nicodemus that God’s devotion to His children is beyond measure. It is love in its purest form.

When I was much younger, there used to be a magazine called “*Colliers*”. It went out of business years ago, but I still remember a story from its pages. It was about a girl in an orphanage who was unattractive and had some really annoying mannerisms. She was female, but not feminine. At the orphanage, the superintendent didn’t like her and looked for a reason to get rid of her. She knew nobody would adopt the girl and the only alternative seemed to be to find some excuse to send her to reform school. One afternoon an opportunity presented itself. The obnoxious girl was discovered outside the orphanage wall pinning a note on a tree. The superintendent and other officials rushed out to the tree to recover the note as evidence to send the girl to reform school. Finally they’d get her off their hands. The superintendent grabbed the note and hurriedly read it. Then she paused a moment, and had to turn away as tears came to her hardened countenance. What did the note say? Only six words: “Whoever finds this – I love you.”

Nearly 2,000 years ago someone else wrote a note and put it on a tree of death outside the city wall. Of him it was written: “He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected ...” (Isaiah 53:2,3) So society sought to get rid of him. He was nailed to a wooden cross. And he had such amazing love that he could ask forgiveness for his crucifiers and leave the timeless message there that says: Whoever finds this, I love you.

That’s what we celebrate this morning as we come to His table. We’re here not because of our goodness, but because of his amazing grace. Not because of our merit but because of his Agape love.

So, look to the cross. See healing there, and life. When we look to the cross we discover a God who loves and cares deeply for each of us – a God who pins a note to an old rugged cross – a note that says, “Whoever finds this, I love you.”

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BENEDICTION: Go in peace, knowing that the cross says “I love you” and that the God of Peace says, “Behold, I go with you.” Amen.