

What Are We So Afraid Of?

A Sermon Expositing John 3:14-21

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You could accuse me, I suppose, of being a bit sappy. I plea guilty to the charge, but I think I have good reason. We have seen so many examples in this world of humans abusing the gifts offered us in creation – the resources, the places, and spaces, yes – but also the qualities of our humanity. Our God-like creativity harnessed for selfish gain, ingenuity employed for purposes that destroy, higher-level communication used to demean, problem solving capacity expended in service for some and not others. With so much of that sort of thing around I just think it's nice to see an example of humans employing both their resources and their qualities in service to another branch of God's creation. Yes, I'm a sucker for animal rescue stories. If you have any presence on the internet or social media at all you'll probably be familiar with what I'm talking about. These moments caught on camera circulate precisely because I am far from the only one who has a hard time resisting them. A dog is discovered in a well, emaciated, wet, cold. Construction workers stop what they are doing and repurpose a heavy crane for the task of lowering one of their own to the dog's rescue. First responders don dry suits, harnesses, ropes and cold weather gear to retrieve a fawn who has fallen partly through the ice of a frozen lake. Campers risk the ire of an angry grizzly to lower a ladder into a garbage dumpster where, moments later, that angry grizzly's three cubs climb out to safety.

I know. They're click bait. Photos, videos, and articles shared just for the purpose of getting me to view ads and click on links. But there on the screen amid the trappings of human excess, greed, materialism, and deception is something that seems authentically wonderful – the capacity for compassion and care to be shared across the branches of God's creation. Having taken in a few of these stories of – of what, shall we say rescue, redemption, reconciliation, even salvation – I have noticed there is a moment nearly universal to all of them. That wet, emaciated pup had to be *lured* into a kennel to be brought to safety. The dear imperiled itself and its rescuer further by struggling to get away on the fragile ice. Mother bear threatened to attack those who were trying to set her cubs free. Staring into the face of salvation they were all *afraid*. You see, whether they are instinct or learned behavior each of those who are rescued have understandings deep within their bones about remaining secure and safe in interactions with other species, particularly those powerful and cunning humans whose actions so often work to the detriment of other species. Rescue, in nearly every situation, required somehow overcoming the fight or flight response.

It is hard, but necessary for some creatures in need of saving to suspend their impulse toward self-preservation. Among them? People, says the gospel writer, John. Our gospel lesson this morning contains one of the most well-known and oft quoted verses in the Christian Scriptures, “For God so loved the world that God gave God's own son that whosoever trusts in him will not perish, but have life unbound.” If ever one needs to make the point that God has entered the world with salvific purpose, this is your go-to verse. Ironically though, this verse in today's world stands so high that it sometimes hides surrounding verses in its shadow. If anything, that God has entered the world to save it, is a restatement of a foregone conclusion in John's gospel. His intent here seems to be to add nuance. These verses are part of Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus who, critically,

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

has approached Jesus in the secrecy of night. That makes it more pointed doesn't it, when Jesus says, "people loved darkness rather than light?" Yes, John wants us to see that God's work in Jesus is to rescue the world from itself, but in these verses he is trying to highlight a particular barrier to that work. Those who are poised to be saved are sometimes terrified of the source of their rescue.

But what is it precisely that they – that we – are so afraid of? Why is it that we are so reluctant to draw near to or to let God draw near to us? Light exposes indiscriminately and God is light says John. A simple and somewhat lazy reading would suggest that some people have *done things* that they are ashamed of being revealed by the light and therefore they remain in the darkness. That though, is a condemnatory reading of the purpose of light and John makes clear here that Jesus has *not* come to condemn the world. There must be more nuance than simply some people are ashamed of what they've done and some are not. Indeed would not all of John's readership in those early centuries and even to this day not be among those who would be embarrassed by some parts of what we've done in this life? No, there must be more.

You have heard me speak of the work of Brene Brown before, and you will again. She is a mental health researcher who *wants* to focus on the good things in life we all wish to experience – connectedness, whole-heartedness, self-satisfaction, belonging, love – but who always follows her research, to her own chagrin, to the *barriers* to those things. In thousands of hours of qualitative research interviews she has identified what she believes to be the most debilitating internal condition most of us face is shame. But here is what's critical – she distinguishes shame from embarrassment or guilt. What's the difference? Embarrassment or guilt are bad feelings about things that we've done, said, or thought. Shame is a negative feeling about one's self that arises from those things. Guilt or embarrassment is, "Ugh, I did something stupid." Shame is, "Ugh, I am so stupid." Here's the funny thing. People love to tell stories about their embarrassment. Oh maybe it takes some time to get over the initial wash of wanting to hide in the broom closet, but eventually we laugh at ourselves and tell the story. People do not – without extensive and rigorous self-work usually with the guidance of a trained professional – talk about their shame. The parts of our lives that make us believe we are less than, unworthy, unlovable are the parts of our lives that we hide - often even from ourselves. They're the parts of our lives that we leave in the dark. We may well have a tendency to hide from the consequences of our poor behavior, but be assured we are far more adept at hiding from being fully known. That friends, is what we are so afraid of – being fully known – not being exposed for what we've done, but being exposed as who we are.

That's why, I believe, this little episode we've read this morning begins in such an enigmatic way, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up..." You'll not likely catch me lifting up any serpents, but John's reference is actually about people being saved from themselves. John is referencing our earlier reading this morning from the book of Numbers, which told the story of the Hebrew people during their 40 year sojourn in the wilderness. At one time they were plagued by snakes – the worst of all possible plagues if you ask me. Many people died of snake bites causing everyone else to be on edge all of the time. Can you imagine feeling the need to peek around every corner, make note of every place you put your hand, every place you take a step, double checking every spot you'd like to sit and rest or lie and sleep!? My skin crawls just thinking of it! But therein lies the important piece. Their heads were on a swivel all the time. When God gave instructions on how to get past the plague, the answer was to craft an image of a snake and put it up on a pole and have everyone look up at it. I promise you, if there's been the report of a snake around me I'm not taking my eyes off the ground or the rocks or wherever it might be. That's the point. In order to be saved from their situation they had to trust enough to turn their eyes up from what was terrorizing them onto something else. For John, that's what Jesus was. Specifically that's what Jesus crucified or "lifted up" was. Christ crucified is an image of violence overcome by peace, of hatred overcome by love, of death overcome by life, of scarcity overcome by plenty. In order to adopt that saving image fully into our lives we have to have enough trust to look up from that which terrifies us and nothing terrifies us like our own unworthiness and unlovability.

Wouldn't it be ironic if all this time we've been keeping ourselves in the dark for fear of being exposed in the light only to find out that the light was always going to reveal that we are good and beloved of God?

Wouldn't it be ironic if we used Lent, the season of the year that has been so centered on shortcomings and downfalls to finally learn that in God's eyes we actually do measure up? Wouldn't it be ironic if in the darkest season of the year we finally stepped into the light of being fully known?
Amen.