

Lent 2 Year A

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

The year was 1993 and Bill Clinton was a new president, I was living in Seattle. For a few days the president was in town meeting with leaders of Asian countries. On one of those days, I found myself in a large crowd of people waiting for the president’s motorcade to pass by. When the president finally appeared, it was disappointing because the windows of his limousine were tinted and the car went by so fast I could hardly see anything. But it was an amazing experience to see all the people who were taking advantage of media coverage to espouse their various causes. On one corner, there was a group in leopard costumes protesting the slaughter of nearly extinct Asian leopards. On another corner, Christians had gathered. One man strode up and down the street wearing a sandwich board. (I doubt he was an Episcopalian). On the front his sandwich board read “John 3:16.” On the back, it warned: “Repent, turn from sin.” Every time I hear “John 3:16” I think of that man or of the people who sit in the stands at football games with signs screaming “John 3:16.” It almost makes it hard to take the verse seriously. But evangelical Christians often look to John 3:16 as the simplest and clearest statement of what they believe and proclaim. I have visited churches in which it would be difficult to find a child over the age of 5 who couldn’t recite the verse by heart. Other Christians have found the verse central also. Luther called it “The Gospel in miniature.”

John’s gospel associates the title “Son of God” with the concept of Jesus’ “coming” or “being sent by God” into the world. Jesus does not simply originate within human society or even the created universe, but enters it from outside, from the divine realm. Over and over again, John emphasizes that Jesus has been sent from God. He has a specific mission to perform and when this mission is completed, he returns to God who sent him.

The Johannine Jesus asserts that those who believe in him have already passed from death to life. Not only does Jesus himself rise from the dead, but he offers that resurrection life to all who believe in him, not only as a hope for the last day, but as a present experience.

The expression “eternal life” sums up what Jesus came into the world to give to human beings. “Eternal life” does not mean simply unending life, but it is a life that is characterized by eternity, by the divine world. “Eternal life”, then, refers not only to quantity but to quality. That is why John can declare that this kind of life begins now, at the moment of belief. The gift of

eternal life is received by believing in Jesus, but this is not just a matter of signing on to a doctrinal formulation. Eternal life is a relationship with the divine. The belief that God did indeed send Jesus into the world, means abiding in him, a continuous engagement with him.

The natural question is: If we are supposed to be abiding in God, why doesn't it feel like it? I don't know about you, but there are many days that I don't feel I am abiding in God or eternal life. As Thomas Merton says, "Life is this simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time...The only thing is that we don't see it." To the best of my understanding, there is a question of self-effort and grace together. Through the grace of God, God's Son is available to us at all times. At the same time, everything we call spiritual practice, from contemplative prayer to serving in soup kitchens are means to sharpen our awareness of God's presence or eternal life. As a great Hindu saint said, "The breeze of God's grace is always blowing; set your sails to catch that breeze."

A good part of living eternal life is noticing that we are living it already. In Cursillo, there is a practice of reporting your "moments closest to God." In the Oblates group, we call those our "God moments." This practice alone – the knowledge that we will be expected to share our "God moments" with a group – can help make us more aware of how God is breaking into our lives.

Here is a little story as told by Anthony de Mello (The Prayer of the Frog p. 45)

A man took his new hunting dog out on a trial hunt. Presently he shot a duck that fell into the lake. The dog walked over the water, picked the duck up, and brought it to his master.

The man was flabbergasted! He shot another duck. Once again, while he rubbed his eyes in disbelief, the dog walked over the water and retrieved the duck.

Hardly daring to believe what he had seen, he called his neighbor for a shoot the following day.

Once again, each time he or his neighbor hit a bird, the dog would walk over the water and bring the bird in. The man said nothing. Neither did his neighbor. Finally, unable to contain himself any longer, he blurted out, "Did you notice anything strange about that dog?"

The neighbor rubbed his chin pensively. "Yes, he finally said, Come to think of it, I did! The son of a gun can't swim!"

Recently on Zoom , we were fortunate to have three guests whom we call "searchers." Searchers are people who are asking the question "How can I best situate myself such that I will find those God moments, such that I will find eternal life?" Convents, churches, and places of pilgrimage are meant to help us maximize our chances of finding God moments. But we can spend our whole lives in a convent, in a church, or in a place of pilgrimage and we will still have to search for the God moments, just the same as everyone else. What looks special or even holy

from the outside is just the place of the daily routine for those who live and work there. For all of us the challenge is to see the dog walking on water in the midst of ordinary life.

Let us pray that our searchers, guests, and all of us will be the ones to spot that water-walking dog. , Amen.