

Prayer of the Day: For all the ways you give and sustain life from the most dilapidated shack to the most delightful sanctuary, we thank you dear God. You call us here to know you a bit better – to behold your beauty, and to seek the mystery of your trinity. Astound us, again, with the immensity of your Spirit’s power in earth and sky and sea, with the intimacy of Jesus’ care for each of us. Then send us throughout the world to make known your love, merciful and mighty, in the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Knowing God

Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-18

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My eyes were still shut to the glare dawning all around. And my mind was half in a dream when I heard his sleeping bag rustle and his voice whisper. “Daddy, can I snuggle with you.” All the little sensors in my skin cried out: No, no, he’s going to be so cold! But he doesn’t ask much anymore. So, I groggily agreed and rolled to one side of the twin mattress. Sometimes it’s amazing what we’re willing to do to share a little love. Birds twittered and squirrels chattered, mourning doves cooed and the distant highway echoed, high overhead a plane rumbled while a car glided by our street and the city came to life. As his head nestled on my shoulder, our eyes traced the nylon seams and peered through the little triangular window. Treetops swayed and leaves quaked softly against the pale blue sky in the same breeze that gently flapped the tent all around us.

After the other two woke up, as well, we named all those sounds we heard on this backyard adventure with dad. Then I asked, “Where do think God is amidst it all?” God made everything. God loves everything, they answered. God is like the breeze, the air that everything needs to live. What a moment of theological bliss! Then a crow cawed and he interjected: “That bird sure is annoying!” “Yes,” I responded after a moment’s pause, “and even when we’re annoying to others, God helps us change for the better, too.” “And God keeps us safe,” he said, “like the stories we made up lying here last night.” You see, a little squirrel, rabbit, raccoon and other forest creatures went off to school together. Then he wanted something bad to happen, like a thunderstorm or a fox. But the animals found a safe place inside an old log; and a dog chased away the fox to save them in the end!

It could have been a tent. More likely a small mud-walled two-room house, when he came to Jesus by night. Sure, Nicodemus knew a lot about God and their religion. And I think he’s sincerely interested when he says to Jesus, “We know a lot about you – tales people tell about changing them for the better; bad things working out. We’ve deduced it’s not possible ... apart from the presence of God.” That phrase has a curious twist the way John tells the story. It’s a faithful affirmation. And it highlights the real question throughout John’s gospel. I write, John concludes much later, so that you may know God in Jesus Christ, and through believing have fullness of life.

You see, friends unless I’m reading it all wrong, in the end it’s not how much we know *about* God that makes the difference in life. It’s how much we *know* God, and other people know the

presence of God's love in us; especially when something bad happens – pain, suffering, uncertainty.

We humans haven't really changed much since the days of Nicodemus and Jesus, have we? Our deepest longings we tried to work out as children remain pretty much the same, don't they? How do we find goodness in our world – where thunderstorms of recession continue rumbling through news flashes and a steady rain of stress; when old foxy death takes away the brother of our high school friend, or our own beloved daughter; and our relations can seem strained? How do we make sense of faith in our world where information to Google or twitter grows exponentially, yet we may feel more distant from God? Don't we long for our someplace in this world where we know we're safe. We can love and be loved. We can contribute meaningfully to life shared with birds and squirrels in the swaying trees, with people passing by in cars or high overhead, maybe even with annoying crows. And as we listen to the sounds all around and trace the seams of life together, just maybe we'll gain some insight to the real question faithful people have worked on since time began: who is God? How can I feel the power of God's grace, the presence of God's peace amidst it all?

“Very truly,” Jesus answers, “no one can see the kingdom of God; no one can share life in the fullness of God without being born from above.” The whole conversation, as John relates it, is layered with innuendo and labored with misunderstanding. Nicodemus gets a bit technical as if we're back in our high school sex-ed courses talking about body parts. Jesus says, “Wait, wait, wait, it's not about literal or scientific calculation. Faith and life is about spiritual relationship.”

And friends, isn't that the trouble we can face with the Trinity? It isn't intended as some sort of academic game or metaphysical litmus test to which we must assent if God is to accept us. Though God knows that's how humans have sometimes abused it. As such, the doctrine is nowhere explicit in scripture. Rather based on Bible passages like those we read this morning it's a creation of human imagination. Read it as poetry more than science. See it as art more than engineering. Feel how it describes God's relationship with us and our world. St. Augustine gave one of the best analogies long ago – God our Maker is Love. Jesus Christ is the Lover. The Holy Spirit is the Loving shared by all of life.

In a more recent quest to express our life and faith using images of the Trinity, William Young wrote a bestseller called *the Shack*. Middle-aged Mack is camping in a tent with his children, as the novel goes, when disaster strikes and an old fox takes his daughter. Years later, still haunted, Mack receives a letter apparently from God. It's an invitation to retrace the physical roads and emotional miles to the seemingly God-forsaken hovel where they'd found evidence of his daughter's death.

He trudges through snow and ice, on edge with every sound, when suddenly a rush of warm air overtakes him. As it moves ahead the wilderness trail begins to thaw, spring flowers unfurl and fragrant scents fill the air. When he arrives at the little two-room shack it's no longer the dilapidated pit he remembers. It's post-card perfect with smoke twirling from the chimney, a fresh picket fence and laughter ringing from inside. He steps hesitantly onto the porch. As he raises his fist to knock, the door flies open and a large African-American woman engulfs him

with her arms and spins him around like a little child. She chatters away, ushers him inside, and says, “You can call me what your wife does.” “What,” he puzzles, “you mean ... Papa?” Then two other people emerge. An Arab looking man in blue jeans remarks, “I like to keep things fixed up around here.” And a kind of Asian woman in gauzy clothing moves constantly, blowing wherever she chooses. She seems more an impressionist image than any well-defined form. “And I am Sarayu,” she sings, “keeper of the gardens, among many other things.” (quoted and abridged, pp. 80-87)

For the next couple of days, Mack gets to know God, the three-in-one, in whole new ways far beyond previous assumptions that transform expectations for his own life. You see, like Nicodemus, Mack knew a lot about religion. Trouble is, he’s stuck on how it all relates with everyday life. Friends, at the heart of our faith, don’t we all need to see how heavenly things and earthly things intimately connect? We need to believe, to give our heart, to belove God in all things.

Out in the garden Mack and Sarayu the Spirit prepare to plant new seeds; first pulling up tangles of decaying roots ... and untangling routines of life, doctrines of faith that would threaten to strangle any new growth. He walks with Jesus out onto the dock and then across the lake talking their way through the Ten Commandments and guilt, his own fears and the order of everything from shooting stars far above to a beautiful trout gliding beneath the waves. Then Jesus helps him find way into the darkest cavern that he must travel alone to meet God’s wisdom, a radiant Hispanic woman incarnate. There Mack judges all the evil done by humans in the world and all the failings in his most intimate relations – his father’s inability to love; his own failure to protect his daughter; even blaming God for allowing evil in the least or actively condemning at worst. Years of pent up fear and sadness come pouring out until Mack lets go of all the pain and judgment in a waterfall of forgiveness through which he sees his daughter again. When he makes his way with Jesus back to the shack, Papa is there in the kitchen as she always seems to be, making scones from scratch or some other delicacy. Not unlike the bread we’ll take when we come with joy to meet our Lord here at this table.

You know, beyond theological explanations William Young offers, powerful though they can be, what I like most about this book is how Mack finds his place with God. The shack of such pain becomes for him a sanctuary of peace. I imagine it’s something like what ancient Israelites who lived in tents or mud-walled huts must have felt as they entered the temple sanctuary in Jerusalem. Again far more than a photographic record, Isaiah gives us a poetic sense of the overwhelming beauty, intimacy and power of God’s love like a descant rising above our chorus of Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty! “Who will go for us?” Isaiah invites you and me to hear. It’s the same question God asks when Jesus calls disciples to go create this kind of sanctuary for all people and creation ... for God so loves the world.

Dear friends, more than sentimental affection God’s love is sacrificial action. The good news is God raises Jesus from the tomb into our hearts and minds every moment of everyday. More than all we can ever know about that great mystery of our faith, we come to know God, by whose power of self-giving love fills us again and again, greater than anything else in our world.

And so, thunderstorms of recession and war may rumble from rubble in Iraq and Afghanistan to empty offices and foreclosed living rooms next door. Yet we seek the ultimate triumph of God's mercy even more than military might; we trust that God's grace extended to a friend, God's resources shared by all returns more value for investment than any money ever could ... for God so loves our world.

Too often an overload of information and even all we know about religion can make it difficult to know God. Yet, we teach children in Sunday School far more than just Bible lessons, we visit a friend hospital, we prepare our dishes to pass at picnic as we nourish each other far beyond whatever delicacies prepared ... for God so loves our world.

And dear friends, believe it is all possible to answer "Here I am, send me," because whatever our shackles of personal pain and shame, God comes to be with us. In God's grace they too will one day become sanctuaries of peace from where we can go to create sanctuary for all ... for God so loves you and me.

Maybe someday my family will go beyond the (not-so-)risky adventure of sleeping in our own backyard to pitch our tent somewhere farther away in our world. Until then, I will try to cherish every time I hear footsteps on the stairs through the darkness as he came down to me last night. You see, he'd slept over at a friend's house a couple of nights ago. They stayed up real late watching the movie *Night at the Museum*. From what I understand, there's a kind of scary part about a mummy that he kept seeing in his dreams. So when he came down half awake, I carried him back up and then snuggled for a moment on the same twin mattress I had carried out to the tent a couple of weeks ago.

Maybe someday we will pitch our tent of life and faith somewhere farther away in this world. Until then, whether it feels like a quiet snuggle or an engulfing hug to spin us around, from all our shackles to sanctuaries ... may we cherish every moment we know we're never apart from the presence of God.

Thanks be to God.