



## *Richmond Hill Reflections*

**“Seeking Transformation”** (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

March 8, 2020; Second Sunday in Lent

Reading: John 3:1-17; “A Converted Life”, Henri Nouwen's Daily Meditation for March 3, 2020

Did you know Costco ran out of toilet paper? It seems ridiculous. Also completely disconnected from more sublime thoughts about Lent, like the meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus, or the spiritual life that Henri Nouwen speaks of. They're connected though so hold onto that thought.

In the meantime, let's consider our gospel. Nicodemus comes to Jesus during the night. A prominent leader, he doesn't want to risk his reputation. “Rabbi,” he addresses Jesus perhaps a bit uncertainly given he isn't credentialed like Nicodemus, “we believe you come from G-d because no one can do what you do without G-d's presence...” He's wondering, like there's a dot-dot-dot at the end of his words. Nicodemus sees Jesus through preconceived notions of who or what he can be, who or what G-d can do. “You say someone needs to be born again?” To him this is not possible whether being physically reborn or a pushing a spiritual reset button.

And we're not that different. We have very clear ways of seeing ourselves, each other, G-d. No wonder Jesus tells us the only way forward is through the Spirit. Nouwen similarly reminds us that a changed perspective is essential to the spiritual life. Whether through a sudden conversion or a slow transformation over time, you see yourself, others, the world differently, see everything through the lens of love. In an odd way, discovering “an inner experience of oneness [where] we realize that we are in the centre” is decentring. We discover how life is larger than we are, there is more wisdom than our set opinions, a larger unfolding at play than our personal plans. The recognition that “all that is and all that takes place [is]... part of the mystery of God's life with us” changes how we relate to one another. What if this is the kingdom of G-d Jesus speaks of?

Given the gospel story happens not long after John the Baptist testifies how the Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove, I can't help but wonder if Jesus is talking about himself when he proclaims the necessity of being born from above in order to see the kingdom of G-d. We often assume that given John's prologue in which he writes of the “Word” being with G-d and people experiencing the “Word” become flesh in and through Jesus, this means Jesus and the “Word” are one and the same and always were even before his birth. What if Jesus' insistence on water and the Spirit came from his experience, that a new awareness came to him at the River Jordan? What if the dove was his experience of the son sent to the world in love not condemnation?

If true, that upends how I experience the text, especially verse 16, that “G-d gave his only son that all who believe may have eternal life.” It shifts the meaning of the gift. We've traditionally read it through the lens of the cross and a particular interpretation at that. This makes some sense given that prior to this famous line Jesus says the Human One must be lifted up like the bronze serpent lifted by Moses to heal the people who'd been plagued by poisonous serpents. Looking at the image saved

them but how? The serpent didn't stand in the people's place. Moses made the image after the people repented not before. It reminded them of what was important, inviting them to look past their self-focus, beyond complaining about manna to remember how G-d was bringing them from slavery into freedom. Similarly, the cross reminds us what happens when we confuse imperial power with G-d's kingdom and calls us from a pattern of violence to remember the power of self-giving love. In the self-awareness we're decentred, able to see what our call is.

Perhaps this is how G-d saves the world by giving us the son. We're given new insight, shown the meaning of the kingdom of G-d, the world reshaped when we love completely, even if that means laying down one's life. Like the bronze serpent, the Human One lifted up as an icon calls us to look past immediate concerns to what G-d's doing around us, bringing us freedom, healing the fractures of the world. This is in contrast to an empty Costco shelf, the store out of toilet paper, bottled water, hand sanitizer, a sense of urgency pivoting to panic even as health officials tell us we're equipped to handle Covid-19, that transmission requires extended exposure, that the mortality rate is quite low. Like the bronze serpent, or the cross, perhaps an empty Costco shelf has the symbolic power to shock us into self-awareness. As people buy whatever they can with-out thought of who else needs supplies, assume that if they have to self-isolate there will be no one to help them, I see our disconnection, how isolated we are, the strong pull of self-focus at the expense of wider relationships. No wonder Nouwen says that in the end we need a conversion, a coming to our senses that our shared connection is more real than any perceived separation.

Thus the sending of the son into the world continues wherever we move past self-focus to living into the kingdom of G-d. Craig caught a glimpse of that in a note sent up with his lunch when he was in hospital, offering compassion and assuring him of love and support. Not far away from Japan in Singapore, synagogue volunteers distributed 10,000 face masks door-to-door to the elderly and infirm so they wouldn't have to stand outside in long lines to get them. That is our call here. I'm sure you've heard that with China and then Iran hit hardest by Covid-19, Chinese and Iranian businesses are struggling as people stay away. What they need is friendship not fear, especially as people have family and friends back home who are impacted. Similarly, as I shared with the children we cannot let our concern for this illness shift our focus from other issues of concern. While people empty Costco shelves of bottled water, there are First Nations still under boil water advisories. Indigenous communities still need allies. Thank goodness then for our relationship with Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School in Thunder Bay. Sixteen boxes on their way north reminds us that in times of crisis we need to reach out, not isolate ourselves further.

G-d sent the son in the world, and keeps doing so, many sons and daughters, every human being from Japan to Singapore, Thunder Bay to Richmond Hill, children of G-d loving the world into wholeness. Through the sending of the Spirit, may we be witnesses of that love. It is the kingdom of G-d. Amen.