

It is Good to Be Here

March 3, 2019

Tired of the snow yet? No, I mean, really. Church ought to be a place where we can let out a little frustration, so let me hear you. Tired of the snow, yet? Tired of the snow, yet? A few voices of dissent. I love it! Lord, hear our prayer.

It pained me last week not to be here with you because of the snow. I heard that Jan's sermon was fabulous, and I know I would have benefited from hearing her. But Clintonville, where I live, seems to be stuck in some kind of weird meteorological vortex. It's like a magnet for snow and wind. On Tuesday, driving home from church ahead of yet another storm, I took Route 29 to Route 22 because my usual route – which is Route 156 – had been icy in lots of spots on the way in, in the morning before the snow was even coming. And I'm not lying – there was no snow in the air until I approached Clintonville from Embarrass, and then the squall began. It was eerie. The snow banks beside my driveway are taller than I am right now.

Now, some of you may remember that a few months ago I preached about how, since returning to Wisconsin, there have been moments when I thought I must have died and gone to heaven. Honestly, I would sometimes wake up in the morning, look out the windows to the woods and the lake as they glistened in the sunrise and think: I'm in heaven.

And then this past Monday morning, Lisa awakened me by saying, "Jon, we have a leak in the family room." Those are not pleasant first words to hear in the morning. It was an ice dam in our gutters. And so, after putting towels down and making coffee, I put on my bright yellow snowsuit that I bought at Goodwill for \$7.95 (it's wonderful; I love the thing) and I trudged through the waist-deep snow drifts, carrying my 16-foot ladder and my 17-ounce pick hammer. I leaned the ladder up against the gutter and climbed up and gradually hacked and banged away at that ice dam until I got down to the shingles. It took me 90 minutes in subzero weather. My eyelashes froze.

And while I was thus engaged, I had time to think. And near the end of my work – 25 feet down the line – my thoughts turned to Dante's Inferno. To Satan. To hell.

Now, usually when we think of hell we think of fire, right? You know, the devil as that dude in the red suit with a pitch fork and flames behind him. But Dante Alighieri, the Renaissance poet, imagined hell very differently. For him, hell had various levels, gradually descending in degrees of sinfulness. Near the top, as one of the lesser sins, were those who lived by lust. According to Dante, lust was twisted love but still reflected some of God's love, so it was a lesser sin than some others. Near the middle – there were, I think, nine levels – but near the middle, for instance, were those who were flatterers, who lied by putting lipstick on a pig, we might say. I'm sure you can think of some contemporary examples. And as you may recall, if you studied The Inferno in high school or college, Dante buried those lying flatterers up to their necks in – well, to put it for church folk – manure. And why? Because that's what they spread around by their

words. This was more serious than lust, thought Dante, because lying made words untrustworthy, and everything depended upon trust.

Which is why, at the very bottom of hell, were those who were traitors: those who had betrayed a friendship, a community, a nation. And here's where it got interesting, to me at least, as I stood there whacking away at my ice dam, the chips flying back at me. The very pit of hell, as Dante imagined it, where traitors dwelled, wasn't hot: it was cold, windy, frozen. Because Satan, who was, of course, the deepest traitor, was as cold as his very cold heart. As Dante depicted him, in fact, Satan was stuck in ice, immovable. There was no light at that deepest pit of hell – just darkness and cold, cold wind, and ice, and snow.

And here's the important point for us, today: to be stuck in the ice, to be immovable, to be unable to change is the opposite of what God intends for us. In both of our readings for today, God is light because it's light that moves us, warms us, radiates through us. God is light because it's light that is the energy that changes things and makes them grow. So, when we live in the light, when we witness God's light at work, we participate in changing things, in bringing new life to a frozen place in our hearts, in our world. And then we can say with Peter: "It is good to be here."

It is good to be here, isn't it? I love this sacred place, and it's the light that is especially beautiful to me, that makes this such a place of glory. That word glory, which is used twice in our brief gospel reading to describe how Elijah, Moses and Jesus appeared, is in the Greek the word *doxa* which literally means "opinion" or "teaching" as in orthodoxy, so *doxa*. But that word harkens back to a Hebrew term for "glory," kaf-bet-dalit, usually pronounced "kaw-bodh." Say it with me: "kaw-bodh." That's glory in Hebrew. And its literal meaning is "heavy," but with a shading of "copious," "abundant," "important." In many, many texts (more than 100 in the Bible), the visual manifestation of kawbodh or *doxa* is light or fire, as in Exodus 24:17 which reads: "And the site of the glory (kawbodh) of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel."

So, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in our story for today were lit up as they conversed in the middle of this blaze. This is a scene waiting for some Hollywood special effects, isn't it? Imagine this light – all the colors of the rainbow – surrounding these three prophets as they talked. That's the kind of picture Luke is painting for us here. They were in glory – the word's used twice – not unlike how we are here in this beautiful place through which these beautiful colors dance around us as energy. And that's why Peter says, "It is good to be here." We live surrounded by glory – when we have eyes to see it.

And that's why Luke has Peter try to lock down the glory. He wants to build three tabernacles to house Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. But, of course, you can't contain glory. Grasp it, and it goes away. And sure enough, a cloud comes along, and a wind, and then Jesus is there alone and the disciples wonder.

And it's no coincidence that it was Peter who makes an effort to lock down the glory. His name, after all, means "rock," and there are those who think that the name was given to him because Peter was a little rock-headed sometimes. He wasn't always the brightest candle on the cake.

And yet we can certainly relate to him, can't we? Change is hard. We're mammals; we like our routines. We like it when things stay the same. And we certainly like it when we can contain a little glory.

For instance, in Philadelphia, Lisa and I had a pretty glorious thing going. We lived in a beautiful old Victorian home on the seminary campus, a three-minute walk for me to class. We had wonderful friends: musicians, hiking buddies, scholars, foodies. And then it all came to an end when the seminary merged and a hostile administration took over. We had some choices to make.

It was hard to leave behind Philadelphia for Wisconsin, leaping into a largely uncertain future. Of course, I knew Wisconsin since I grew up in Appleton, but that was 40 years ago. I wasn't sure what I was going to do for a living since I had negotiated a part-time reduction in my teaching. We weren't sure how living in Wisconsin would impact Lisa's work travel. We lived with the anxiety of change. We faced a death, and we weren't sure there was life on the other side.

Now, in our gospel for today – versions of which are also found in Mark and Matthew – Luke includes a detail that's unique to Luke's version of the story. Mark and Matthew merely say that Jesus was "talking with" Elijah and Moses, but Luke says Jesus was "speaking with them about his departure." In other words, in the midst of all this glory, Jesus was facing death.

And isn't that how it is for us, too – here in the midst of this winter – when we're honest? When we face our winter honestly, when we face our death honestly, when we face the prospect of change honestly, that's ironically when we can see the glory of new life. Sometimes it happens in an instant. Sometimes it happens gradually over a long, slow revelation. But out of death comes new life; out of winter, spring; out of change, glory.

Every Saturday for the last eight weeks or so, I've been coaching my second grade grandson, Jaxon, in basketball. My son, Nathan, was the head coach, and I was his assistant. And we started out the season not very good. We were terrible, in fact. Jaxon and most of the boys wouldn't chase the ball, wouldn't rebound. Jaxon's a really nice, sweet kid, and it was like he would say to his opponent: "Here, this is a pretty orange ball. Would you like to have it?"

But slowly, incrementally, he got it. It started with defense. He stayed between his man and the basket. And he helped out his teammates. And gradually his shot started going in during practice. He began using the backboard on layups. And he started jumping and running to chase down rebounds.

And then two weeks ago, he hit his first hoop in a game, his first basket ever in a competitive basketball game. His great-grandparents, my parents, who used to watch me play were there, and his dad, who I used to watch play, was there. And Jax's dad, Nate, said when the ball went in the hoop: "Yes!"

And as I watched Jaxon come down the floor after making that hoop, the smile on his face was a thing of glory. He looked radiant. That was a heaven moment for me, and it made the whole miserable winter in Wisconsin worthwhile.

And each of us has moments like that, can have moments like that: glory moments that transfigure the dark winter with the light of God's grace, and beauty, and mercy. When we sing with this great choir, lifting our voices in praise to the living God, we live in the light of glory. When we tutor a child at On the Mark Dyslexia Clinic and we see recognition in a child's eyes as she learns, we live in the light of glory. When we meet around the table with a ministry team or the new board of the Brain Center who had its first meeting this last week, laughing, and arguing, and planning a future for this beloved community, we live in the light of glory.

And who knows what the future holds, what exciting new ministry opportunities might arise here among us.

We are heading into Lent which begins this Wednesday. We are heading into the 40 days of Jesus' passion where he faced honestly his death on the cross so that we might live in the light of glory. Glory is everywhere when we recognize it. We can find heaven moments even in the middle of the most ruthless winter.

So, live in the light. Generate heaven moments. Look for them. Recognize them because finally it is good to be here. And all God's people say, Amen.

Dr. Jon Pahl
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
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