

MORE THAN VISITORS

3/14/21 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA (*Livestreamed*)

Lent 4 (B): ~~Numbers 21:4-9~~; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Have any of you watched “My Octopus Teacher”? Documentaries aren’t my favorite, but after several friends raved about it, I finally acquiesced the other night, and escaped into an underwater kelp forest off of South Africa. Not only is the scenery stunning, the personal story of Craig Foster, the filmmaker, is captivating.

Craig doesn’t set out to make friends with an octopus, but early on in his commitment to go into the ocean every day for an entire year, he spots this octopus and becomes intrigued by the way it seems to be watching and assessing him. Over the course of several days, he gently makes his presence known near the entry of the octopus’ den, leaving his camera lie nearby overnight, etc.

At first, when Craig comes closer, the octopus only explores his fingers; a few days later, she slides out a little further to wrap a tentacle around his arm. It’s obvious, she’s curious, as she studies him from across the way, but she’s also assessing her risk of harm. Can she trust this being, or the situation presenting itself? And, then, one day, she finally just swims directly toward Craig and rubs her tentacles all over his chest.

This morning’s passage from the Gospel of John has me imagining any one of us as the octopus. God simply waits at the edges our lives—close enough for us to sense God’s presence—but being careful not to encroach until we’re ready. In today’s passage, Jesus says things to indicate—as Craig did with his actions—that we can trust the message; that we won’t be harmed or, in our case, judged. Jesus says, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The message offered by Jesus—over and over again—is that God’s love is merciful and all inclusive. We won’t be judged or condemned when we get close to God. Rather we will be completely accepted, loved and cherished. And yet, we know that Jesus’s message doesn’t stop with the fact we are each loved by God. Rather, we have come to understand that the love Jesus shares is an active kind of love. In other words, as we become aware of God’s love, we’re called to share that love with those around us through our words and actions—or as our reading from Ephesians refers to it: our works.

The author of Ephesians writes: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” We don’t do anything to receive God’s gift of grace. Just like the octopus who did absolutely nothing to bring this kind and compassionate entity into her world, God offers Godself to us. At the same time, this Ephesians passage explains: “For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works.”

God’s love always leads to action, so we are destined for good works. Which is why there’s talk in our Gospel reading about moving toward the light. Now, I want to stress that these metaphors about light and dark are not to say that all darkness is bad. For instance, some of our most profound transformations happen in what’s called, “the dark night of the soul.”

The dark is where gestation and germination occur—but being in the light means nothing is hidden. In the light, everything is out in the open. It’s the place where we can see clearly enough to understand what’s going on, and confidently surrender ourselves to God’s love, realizing we won’t be harmed; that we won’t be judged.

Using that metaphor, it's easy to see that another thing we keep hidden from ourselves in the dark, are the idols we've constructed—or helped to construct. So, building on our conversation from last Sunday, Jesus invites us to bring those idols—or the propensity to construct them—into the light, so that we, too, can be among those in the group that John describes in this line: "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in Christ may not perish but may have eternal life."

The eternal life Jesus speaks of is about abiding with God outside of time—or the kind of time that doesn't have a beginning or an end, it just is. That kind of abiding in God—and God in us—is available to us all. The Psalmist describes the reaches of God's love this way: "from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south." God's love encompasses all peoples, from all directions; everyone is welcomed into God's kingdom.

And we're not just welcomed in for a visit, we are adopted into God's family, so that we all can do God's good works of love and mercy. Craig Foster explains it well when he wraps up what his octopus teacher gifted him with.

He says: "What she taught me was to feel that you're part of this place, not a visitor." In God's kingdom, because we're a part of this place, we know love is an action. So, in the coming weeks, I invite you to remember that none of us are visitors here. We are a part of this place, and in this place, we do God's good works.

-AMEN

Collect of the Day:

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." ⁶Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

¹O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.
²Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble
³and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.
¹⁷Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
¹⁸they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death.
¹⁹Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress;
²⁰he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction.
²¹Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.
²²And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

Ephesians 2:1-10

²You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.
⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

John 3:14-21

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

