



Look on the Bright Side

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph Schaller

The Third Sunday in Lent ~ March 24, 2019

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations."

Psalm 63:1-8

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| 1 O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you; *
my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you,
as in a barren and dry land where there is no water. | 5 My soul is content, as with marrow and fatness, *
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips, |
| 2 Therefore I have gazed upon you in your holy place, *
that I might behold your power and your glory. | 6 When I remember you upon my bed, *
and meditate on you in the night watches. |
| 3 For your loving-kindness is better than life itself; *
my lips shall give you praise. | 7 For you have been my helper, *
and under the shadow of your wings I will rejoice. |
| 4 So will I bless you as long as I live *
and lift up my hands in your Name. | 8 My soul clings to you; *
your right hand holds me fast. |

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written

down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

This past Tuesday, the title of a Frank Bruni op-ed piece in the New York Times caught my attention: A **'Disgusting' Yale Professor Moves On: How a target of students' ire came to write a book about humanity's transcendent goodness.** The piece was about Nicholas Christakis, described by Bruni as “an intellectual rock star” for his scholarship and academic achievement, including a 2009 listing in Time magazine's inclusion in list of the 100 most influential people. He has taught at the University of Chicago, Harvard, and since 2013, Yale.

But, as Bruni writes:

...he is best known not for what he has accomplished but for what he absorbed: taunts and insults from furious Yale students who swarmed him in a campus courtyard one day. “You should not sleep at night!” one of them screeched, as he miraculously kept his cool, a mute punching bag. “You are disgusting!”

The incident that precipitated this encounter occurred at Yale in the fall of 2015

Christakis's wife, Erika, who also taught at Yale back then, had circulated a memo in which she questioned a university edict against culturally insensitive Halloween costumes, suggesting that students could police themselves and should have both the freedom to err and the strength to cope with offense. She wrote that her husband concurred.

And all hell broke loose. Hundreds of students [signed an open letter](#) denouncing her and [hundreds demanded](#) that the couple be punished. There were protests. And when, in that courtyard, Christakis apologized for any pain that the memo had caused but refused to disavow its content. He was pilloried.

Bruni continues:

So imagine my surprise when an advance copy of his new book, to be published next week, arrived. Titled [“Blueprint,”](#) it's no lament for the mess that we humans make of things. It's an argument that we're transcendentally and inherently good — that we're genetically wired for it, thanks to a process of natural selection that has favored people prone to constructive friendships, to cooperation, to teaching, to love. “For too long,” he writes in the preface, “the scientific community has been overly focused on the dark side of our biological heritage: our capacity for tribalism, violence, selfishness and cruelty. The bright side has been denied the attention it deserves.”

The bright side? From a man who had students refuse to shake his hand at graduation; who lost friends among Yale's faculty; and whose wife, a [respected expert in child development](#), was so thoroughly ostracized that she had to [leave the university?](#)

In his interview, Christakis said that “few people realize that he listened to those students for more than two hours, and that they hadn't intercepted and surprised him: He went out to meet them, knowing how angry they were. “I felt that I had to model the principles that I believed — which is that I am committed to free and open expression,” he said. “I hardly could cower in my house.”

Although he stayed calm — which he attributes to years of training in karate and its premium on self-control — he was rattled, deeply, by the encounter. He soon took his first sabbatical ever. He read books about equanimity in the face of injustice. “I did not want to become a different person,” he said. “I certainly did not want to become embittered.”

Many of us are aware of the complexity of our current society, where passions regarding the freedom of speech collide with the legitimate need of people and groups to feel respected and understood. But for the moment, I'm less focused on that dilemma than I am the age-old debate which takes place in philosophy classes, college dorms, and, oh yes, churches--over whether human beings are inherently evil or good. We could stop here and break into small groups and discuss, but I fear we might never reach consensus. We've got plenty of evidence of how wretched humans can be, but to take Christakis' perspective, there is also plenty of evidence for the contrary position.

Bruni continues:

Yes, there are hideous wars and horrid leaders. But if that were the sum of us, how to explain all the peace and progress? Christakis urges a wide angle and the long view. “To accept this belief that human beings are evil or violent or selfish or overly tribal is a kind of moral and intellectual laziness,” he told me. It also excuses that destructiveness. “The way to repair our torn social fabric is to say: Wait a minute, that's not quite right.” His reasoning, oversimplified, is this: Complex societies are possible and durable only when people are emotionally invested in, and help, one another; we'd be living in smaller units and more solitary fashions if we weren't equipped for such collaboration; and human thriving within these societies guarantees future generations suited to them.

Christakis isn't the first or only theorist to posit the inherent goodness of humanity or even the robust existence of virtue. But it is a bit of a hard sell in many instances.

As for the example of Christakis himself, the story of a man who knowingly walks into a situation of danger and a hostile crowd because of principle should sound familiar to us. Lent is a journey with Jesus who has his face to go to a place where he will suffer and die.

In Luke's gospel today, Jesus takes a somewhat rare definitive position by stating that bad things can happen to innocent people, and that the tragedies of life do not constitute punishment for bad behavior. That might be good news to some extent, except it seems to give us even less opportunity to control external forces to our lives. And then, Jesus makes the point, repeatedly, that we need to repent, otherwise all is lost. So, the presumption seems rather pessimistic. Then there's the interesting parable of the infamous fig tree, which hasn't shown much promise. Yet it is the gardener who negotiates the reprieve. And then pledges to nurture the tree. Throughout all the parables about redemption and salvation we find intertwined threads of urgency and patience, dread and hope.

The challenge in all of this is that we might still feel that our salvation is precarious and provisional. One false move and we've blown it! In 1st Corinthians, Paul has a whole list of things we can do that might put our salvation at risk, including complaining! In other places, he allows that it is really impossible for human beings to win salvation on our own, but only through the power of God. There is a theology of the cross which assumes that humankind is so depraved that the only way we could be saved is through God killing his son on the cross. But I think this idea misses the mark by a mile. Jesus does not substitute himself for us—he completely joins with us, even in death on a cross. You couldn't have a starker example of the brutality, unfairness and capriciousness of life. Yet at the same time, cross and resurrection together reveal a transcendent quality to the drama of life, an option for hope over despair, and a calling to live beyond what we can often imagine.

We can never escape the truth of human existence. We are dependent, vulnerable, and capable of doing great harm. Neuroscientists will tell us that at the base of our complex and amazing brains is an ancient "reptilian" core which gets activated all the time. It's the center of the automatic "fight or flight" which can unconsciously sense danger and trigger us to respond for the sake of self-preservation. The instinctual part of us which prefers the company of our own tribe rather than the stranger. So, in one sense, we are selfish at the core of our being. But that's only part of the story. Theologians from Thomas Aquinas to Karl Rahner and beyond have argued that we inherently have a capacity to grasp the transcendent—that we are existentially positioned to receive grace which is the self-communication of God's love and power. We couldn't aspire to holiness if we didn't already have an inherent capacity to recognize the good. But we need to be "woke"—to be awakened to the reality of this power and possibility. In essence, not just to be our "better" selves but our "true" selves. In Jesus, God is trying to arouse us and nudge us forward.

Perhaps this is why we speak of "salvation" both as something which has already been accomplished as well as something yet to be fulfilled. All of creation is in God and all of God is in creation, yet we are still moving toward what Teilhard de Chardin called the "omega point," the complete realization of Christ in love.

Of course, this is a position of faith. It is easier—perhaps safer—to put stock in the more pessimistic account. Most people remember bad experiences more vividly than good ones—unless we repress or dissociate them. This also appears to be rooted in our biology, perhaps another example of an instinct for self-preservation. But we also hold deeply rooted capacities for self-transcendence, sacrifice and loving-kindness. And we also need to be "fertilized" through encouragement and support from one another. We are rooted and grounded in love, that we might bear fruit, and be complete in God's glory of creation.