

Sermon for 2 Lent, Year C
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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“Lord, will those who are saved be few?” We don’t quite know what motivates this question. We don’t even know who asked it. It might have been someone who thought they would be saved, and wanted to know that he was special. It might have been someone who thought he wouldn’t be saved, and wanted an excuse for not measuring up. Whatever the specific motivation, we can definitely say that the question must have come from someone who was keeping score.

Of course, Jesus doesn’t answer the scorekeeper’s question. He turns it immediately around. “... many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us.’ He will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’” In other words, “It’s none of your business whether other people are saved. But enough people will *not* be saved, that you’d better start working on your own life.”

“*Strive*,” Jesus says, “Strive to enter by the narrow door.” The Greek word is *agonizo*, from which we get the word “agonize”. You shouldn’t be concerning yourself with scorekeeping. You should be entirely focussed on working out your own salvation.

Notice that I said “working out”, not “achieving”, your own salvation. The door into the house may be narrow. But it is *open*. It is only in the future tense that Jesus says it will be closed: “*When* the householder has risen up and shut the door ...” Anyone who comes while it is open will be received. Because God has opened the door of salvation by his own power and authority. And his own humility.

It may seem strange to speak of God’s humility. But that is exactly what we owe our salvation to. The passage from Genesis this morning is a story that is very strange to our cultural ears, with references to slavery and forgotten inheritance customs, half-butchered pieces of meat lying around, Abram driving the carrion birds away, and the disembodied flames passing through the midst of the sacrifices. But the long and the short of it is that God humbled himself in order to seal his covenant with Abram. He doesn’t promise here anything that he hadn’t already promised. You’d think that Abram would catch on. But then I think of how many times I have required God to reaffirm his promises and his character.

In this scene, Abram finally trusts him. The text simply says, “And he believed the Lord.” And the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” He still has questions and concerns. And God humbles himself to reaffirm promises that he had never broken, simply because Abram needed to hear them again. “Yes, you will have innumerable descendants. Yes, you will possess the land.” God even goes through this bloody covenant ceremony, because Abram (and his descendants) need to be reassured that he will do what he has promised.

The most appalling example of God’s humility is Jesus and his crucifixion. When the Pharisees tell him to run away from Herod, he says, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.’” Even “Go tell that fox” is a sign of humility in a sense. He speaks without fear, out of perfect confidence in the truth about himself. But “finish my course”, in this riddle, is a reference to his crucifixion. The word here is related to Jesus’ word from the cross itself, “It is finished.” But it also bears a sense of completion of purpose or perfection. Jesus says here, “I will be perfected.” Now how can the eternal, perfect, second person of the Holy Trinity have anything added to him by way of perfection?

The answer is that his *telos* or end, the purpose that God has set for himself, is the good of his creation. In the perfection of his own being, he wills the good of his creatures, our salvation. And he sets himself to accomplish this end, the fulfillment of which is found in the humiliation of scourging and shameful public execution. Throughout the history of creation, God has humbled himself to be in relationship with us, but the consummation of that humility is the hard, rough wood of the cross.

The counterpart to this overflow of humility from the Almighty is the total lack of it on the part of his people. Almost in the same breath, Jesus says, “Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.” This is high irony. Jerusalem is supposedly the city of *shalom*, that state of perfect right relationship between God and his creation. And it is this city of peace, this city of *shalom*, that is most egregiously at war with the Prince of Peace himself. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!”

Yet even in the midst of this situation, Jesus laments their rebellion. “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” Rebellion and apostasy among the people of God is nothing new. God has been dealing with it for far longer than we have, and his desire is always the healing, protection, and salvation of his people, no matter what has gone before. His appalling humility always holds the door open far longer than we would. And he weeps over all those that *will not choose* to come through the door.

But there does come a point at which the door is closed. Evil cannot be allowed to go on forever. Jesus says to Jerusalem, “Behold, your house is forsaken.” The presence of the Lord has departed from the temple. And those who try to enter for the feast, without having striven to enter by the narrow door, find that they have chosen to remain outside. The master does not know where they come from. Why? Because they were never *with* him. They may have seen him. They may have been at meals with him. They may even have heard him teach. But they were never with him. They never looked for the narrow door that he was holding open as long as he could.

And there the enemies of the cross of Christ will be as the night falls and everything is dark and cold. And the amazing thing is that they will still be keeping score! “There you will weep and gnash your teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves thrust out. . . . Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

They will be sitting in the dark, keeping score, when all they had to do in the first place was let go of their self-conscious obsessions with their own independence and achievement. The striving that Jesus commends to us is really the hard work of ceasing to “do it ourselves”. If we are humble enough to accept a God who humbles himself, we have only to walk through the door held open, to meet the one who more than anything else wants us to find our way.

Will those who are saved be few? It’s tempting to look around and say, “It sure looks like it!” But Jesus’ answer is the better one, the humbler one. Forget about all of them and what’s going to happen to them. Strive to enter by the narrow door! It’s not our job to worry about when the door closes for others. It’s our job to get in ourselves and to point the way to others as best we can. And let’s thank God for his humility and love in opening the door for us, miserable self-righteous fools that we are.