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Narrative Lectionary 4.20 – Nicodemus/RIC Sunday
John 3:1-17

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Salem Lutheran, Bridgeport

The other day I walked through the door after yet another seventeen hour work day, beyond exhausted. What was waiting for me on the table was my usual coffee order from Dunkin Donuts, with a book of poems that I had wanted for weeks. I smiled, knowing it was a gift from the love of my life. She left an orange sticky note protruding from one of the pages. “Reminded me of you. You make me prouder than you’ll ever know.” The poem read:

“my god is not waiting inside a church or sitting above the temple steps
my god is the refugee’s breath as she’s running
is living in the starving child’s belly
is the heartbeat of a protest
my god does not rest between pages written by holy men
my god lives between the sweaty thighs of women’s bodies sold for money
was last seen washing the homeless man’s feet
my god is not as unreachable as they’d like you to think
my god is beating inside us infinitely.”

Twenty-first century Christians are in a unique spot, a holy period of historic and liberating transitions. It’s equal parts exciting and terrifying. Western culture has embarked upon a massive revision of what it means to be human by expanding limits imposed by fundamentalist Christianity. The spirit of our age delights in the beauty of God’s design for human life that is so much richer and more diverse than previously thought. God created all humans for God’s glory. But for too long we have internalized the ideals that those worthy of God’s glory are cisgender and heterosexual. Many Christians now understand that binaries and backward thinking excludes a large and important part of God’s plan and people. The road to full and lasting joy is appreciating God’s design through a variety of identities of gender and expressions of sexuality that have previously been denied by short sighted and limited thinking.

So in honor of this movement, I’d like to offer my personal interpretation of our beloved life verse, John 3:16. You don’t have to agree with me, it’s not set in stone. It’s just one for us today, as who we are, in this place and as these people. In the beginning, God, the source of all goodness, set the universe in motion through a unique and self-giving love song containing only four words: ‘Let there be light.’ God so loved the world that God gave God’s own breath to produce harmony amongst primordial chaos. Through dust and the very breath of divine love, humanity was created. In the image of that hymn of the ages, we too were given voice and language and breath and song.

And that love song of creation keep ringing strong, but humanity had this tendency to create our own melodies in another rhythm, in another key, in our own scale. So the song of life eternal, combined with human-generated, temporary, alternative songs, created an environment where domination, violence, greed, and power received a seat at the table, and that’s never a good idea.

Once again, God’s breath was gifted to us, only this time, the sound interrupted the din of the Roman Empire. This time, the love song was heard in the cry of a newborn baby. God so loved the world that God gave God’s self to it in the form of a son. This birth was such a huge deal that angels sang in return, all the heavenly hosts joined in, interrupting the regularly scheduled programming of soldiers, taxes and purity codes. God so loved our corrupt world of crooked empires, victims, and violence that God gave God’s self to us in the most vulnerable and fragile way possible. God so loved the world God created that God walked among humanity as Love, grilling fish on the beach with sand between his toes. But not that kind of love we’re thinking of, not the love of this world limited by self-interest, biology, and time. This love takes no account of opinion or history. Instead it insists on ignoring our societal binaries on what is and isn’t acceptable.

For God so loved the world. For God so loved soldiers and prostitutes and traitors and single mothers and mini van driving soccer moms and CEO’s and ex-convicts and McDonalds janitors that God gave of God’s self in the form of Jesus. And Jesus is like a clearer set of lyrics to save us from the unrelenting noise of sin and self-preservation. So that we might not perish, but have the passion to march to the true beat and real rhythm of creation and salvation.

And those who heard this tune, couldn't help but begin to sing it to others. They wrote about it in Gospels and hymns about this eternal life that is with you and for you. Don't try and believe it. Just hear it, and try to live in response to it. After all, a certain man named Marty Luther once said, "a person becomes a Christian, not by working, but by listening."

Because singing and believing the wrong song is bound to happen. We have so many alternatives to the life offered to us in the form of love that beats out the rhythm of God. Like the song that tells us we are alone, or the song which sings of reaching for glory of our own. Like the song of condemnation that says we are not worth to be called children of God. There are so many of these so-called songs, they form a layer of white noise drowning out the still small voice of God. But the things that think they can drown out God's voice have never lasted forever, and they never will. These competing songs are really of no consequence, they can never out last the one that has rung out since the dawning of time. For they are not eternal, nor are they life.

That Divine love song will take us back, again and again and again. It may take time to hear this song, and that is not a cause for concern, but one for rejoicing. What is the point of a song whose truth and beauty and be exhausted all at once?

We have countless ways to sing and respond and reflect and react outside this sanctuary to the victimization of already vulnerable communities (people of color, queer folk, or Muslims for example), and some of us have been doing that. We've reached for what we do---for vigils and sharing of memes on social media and contacting our legislators and checking in on each other and holding each other accountable. But here in this sanctuary, here is where we look for Jesus and reach for the Prince of Peace.

The church has driven out LGBTQ people for centuries, especially over the last several decades. In response, God calmly says "We're all good out here. When you chase my people out of your churches, I will be with them. When they gather, I will be there. In clubs and amidst conversations and within protests. In lament and anger and tears and laughter and one too many drinks. I will be with them and make this right for them. I will draw them close and love them fiercely for their wounds. I will know them and they will know me. They will tell you my name. I will walk them out of the tomb.

As a queer Christian, this is what I confess: that the tombs of life are real but they are not the most real thing. That God comes close to those cast out, long before John 3:16. God comes close to Hagar cast out of Abraham's house and to the eunuch cast out of the early church. God comes close to the terrorized. And despite what we think is best, God brings mercy even the worst demons. At the end of the day, that's super disturbing to me. But if I'm being honest, that's exactly the kind of Savior I need.

Because my instinct in times like these is to hide a divide, sometimes until it seems I am entirely alone. But the poison that created disease cannot also be the medicine that cures it. And dividing people up is what creates white supremacy and religious extremism and purity systems and homophobia and bathroom laws. And what can we do? Blame the people who vote differently. Blame those who think or act differently. Blame people who post on Facebook differently. Blame allies who aren't reacting in the way you'd like them to.

Sometimes it may feel the world wants a vigilante savior. But what is needed is a savior who brings a swift, terrible mercy. What I want is a dividing savior, who will draw the same lines in the sand that I would draw. But what I know I need is a Savior who makes us one, who lifts us up, who draws all to himself. Not just the worthy, the lovely, and the lucky. ALL. I am in desperate need of a savior who commands me to love my enemies and pray for those who persecute me simply because my partner is a woman. To pray for those whose hate blinds them to both their own goodness and the worth and dignity of others. I need a savior this merciful because it is I who also needs this mercy. While the tombs of life are real, and Jesus knows this, he will also be the first to exclaim that tombs have overstayed their welcome and have no place here.

There is validity in being in the tombs for a bit. Believe me, I am right there with you. But we are not meant to stay. Jesus is approaching us, and he is not unfamiliar with tombs. Jesus himself knows what it's like to be afraid, to survive hate. I don't think I'd be able to trust him if he wasn't. He also knows hate may get a seat at the table or may win the battle, but love will attend the banquet and will win the war.

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. Amen