

Staircase Thoughts

I was visiting an assisted living facility. On the way in I said 'Hi' to an old man taking the sun. Once I reached the room I realized I had forgotten something. I went back; out on coming back in I said, "It's me again." He replied, "A staircase thought." I asked him what that meant. He said it was the thought you have after leaving a place that you remember as your heading down the stairs. That's basically how one commentary styles our text. These things "carry the tone of one turning to leave" yet not wanting to (Lenski, *John*, 1013). We're in the upper room. Jesus is about to descend the staircase not to heaven but to hell, and has some last thoughts to share.

The first is "know Me and you know God." So much is revealed about Jesus: His conception, birth, His toddler years, even an incident as an adolescent, then His 3-year ministry, and finally an intense focus on the last week of His life, death, and resurrection. God the Father on the other hand dwells in light unapproachable, is a consuming Fire, and Jn. 1:18 tells us, No one has seen Him at any time. Actually, it's even worse than ELO sung or the Medusa myth has it. Mortals coming face to face with the true God in His glory aren't just turned to stone, they die. Ex. 19:21, "The Lord said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish." Ex. 33:20, "But," God said, 'no one may see Me and live."

Trying to approach, know, believe in God outside of Christ is a scary, life-threatening proposition. But in Jesus we find, according to the rest of Jn. 1:18, "The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him." And in 2 Co. 4:6 we read, "For God, ...made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." And in Lk. 10:22 Jesus says, "No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him." And of course our text opens with the striking exchange between Jesus and the Apostles: "Jesus said..." No one comes to the Father, but through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.' Philip said to Him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father'" (Jn. 14:6-10).

Confirmation kids will ping-pong between the two Persons of the Trinity saying, "God, no I mean Jesus; no I mean God." There really is no problem as long as you don't have God the Father becoming flesh, dying, or rising. Besides, the only way to know the God you can't see is by the God you can. And in Him you see all that God wants you to know about Himself. Now look at our text. All that they know about Jesus is true of the invisible God. But how to know Jesus? Jesus points to the Spirit coming and teaching them all things and reminding them of *everything* Jesus said. So where do we have what the Apostles knew? The Word. Rome in trying to kill Christianity found it did no good to kill Christians. So they attacked what made Christians. The Bible. No Bible, no Jesus, and no God. Now the Bible is all over the place but no need to destroy it. For the most part, it's a closed book.

That indeed is a troubling thought. Jesus started our chapter telling them their hearts don't have to be troubled because His Father's house has many rooms and He goes to be rejected, suffer, and die to purchase a place for them. Now in one parting staircase thought, Jesus comes back to their trembling and now adds cowardice literally saying, "O just stop. You no longer have to be troubled or a coward." Here though, stopping is not based on Jesus having many places and making one for you, but the Father and the Son coming and making a place with you. You can stop trembling and fearing because the Father and Son are moving in with fallen, sinful, mortal, you.

Jesus does the same thing with peace. As with making a room, Jesus escalates the comfort. First, Jesus says He gives peace and then says, it's not just any old peace but *My* (emphatic) peace and He doesn't just "leave" peace for you to find it or not but He gives it to you. For Greeks as with us, peace is the absence of war. For the OT Church shalom was a positive all encompassing blessing which included a right relationship with God. Once the LXX used 'peace' to translate 'shalom' that Greek word has all the freight of the Hebrew. And see how Jesus makes a distinction between peace as the world gives it and how He does *not* give peace that way.

Now put this parting staircase thought all together. I've spent a lifetime trying to give peace a chance, to have that peaceful easy feeling, and particularly for the last 2 ½ years, it's been a nightmare. One I didn't wake up from. No sooner do I talk myself down from the media telling me Covid will kill us all, then runaway inflation hits. Then once I come to peace with that here comes war. I look for the peace the world gives and only find it when conflicts

cease, when I can explain problems away, when I can ignore discord. The world's peace is as the morning dew. It lasts till the sun of controversy, conflict, or unbelief burn it off. But Jesus gives me Shalom. That's the peace unilaterally announced by God at Jesus' Birth, in the Cross, at His resurrection, and in every Gospel promise, Sacrament, and Absolution. This is the parent who takes a terrified toddler in their arms. You don't explain the terror, excuse the terror, you impart your peace by holding the child. The conflict, the lack of peace we feel, know, see comes from being sinful and separated from God. The Prince of Peace having healed that breach in His Body comes and wraps His arms around us in Word and Sacraments.

Staircase thoughts are important enough to bring you back to speak them. What does love have to do with them? Confessional Lutherans rightly reject the papacies display of love on Maundy Thursday where the Pope makes a show of washing the feet of a poor, diseased, or disabled person. The rabbis also showcase 'love' by saying that only the one who would lick the wounds of a leprous man has love. Yet Jesus does start these staircase thoughts with love: You can't really love Him if you don't obey His teaching. And then ends amplifying this thought. If you're not glad He ascended into heaven to the Father, you don't love Him. If you don't see the connection between your redemption, His ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, you don't really love Him.

I'll tell you what the problem is. Of the 4 loves that C.S. Lewis described: affection, friendship, eros, and charity, we know the first 3 but not the last. O we know charity but only in the sense of giving to the poor, feeding the hungry. Go home and read Paul's chapter on love, 1 Cor. 13. Read it in the King James. Charity edifies, is longsuffering, kind, envies not, is not puffed up. Charity, not your sticky sweet affections, not your brotherly love, not your eros doesn't fail and is greater than faith and hope. Our text is about this kind of love. The type that is not drawn out of us by a person or object. The type that is not a feeling or sentiment. For 55 or so years we've been taught that the standard is to do what a person or now what social media or virtue signals say is loving. If a man wants to be a woman or a woman a man the loving thing to do is accept their choice. If a mother wants to kill her unborn baby, the only loving thing to do is help her do it safely. If man wants a divorce, well love will want that too for him.

When Jesus says, "love your neighbor as yourself", He again uses the word not of feeling, not of aww, but of intelligence and purpose. When God so 'loved' the world, it was that type of love. So what's not to love in the Father's teaching? God reveals Himself in Christ to be Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. God apart from Christ operating in creation is frightening. If you've ever been close to a lightening strike you know this. God acting in redemption, i.e. abandoning His Son on the cross as the worst sinner, the only sinner ever is frightening. If He could do that to His beloved Son what about us Prodigal, faithless, impenitent ones? Even in sanctifying God acting apart from Jesus is frightening. Go to Sinai and the shaking, smoking, darkened mountain and hear God telling Moses, "Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, 'Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy'" (Lv. 19:2).

God apart from Christ even in creating, redeeming, and sanctifying leaves me shaking, troubled, cowardly. Now let's replay these scenes with the staircase thoughts Jesus leaves us. Listen to what Jesus *says*; look at what Jesus *does*. The invisible God would deal with us only in Jesus' Person and Work. That means when all creation seems to be against us, we remember that the Man Jesus who is also God, reigns and rules over it still. And when we come to the cross, it's judgment, punishment, pain and hell, all fall on Jesus not us. God the Father has spent all His wrath, rage, and hell on the crucified Jesus, so that in the risen Jesus, in His Body and Blood, His Water, and Words we are safe. You are safe from a raging grass fire if you stand where it has already burned. Finally, look at your sanctification in Jesus too. He doesn't send you the Spirit as bolt of lightening to get you in gear. He sends you a Comforter, a Counselor putting into your soul forgiveness, assurance, His peace and love by means of what He puts into your eyes, ears, mouth, hand and even nose.

You know how a child, or even an, adult can have something "they're dying to tell you"? Well, Jesus' died to tell these staircase thoughts to you, for you. Amen

Sixth Sunday of Easter (20220522); John 14:23-29

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