

The Gift of Lift

John 3: 1-15

One the bloodiest American battles in World War II began on February 19, 1945, on the tiny Japanese-held island of Iwo Jima. Just in saying that name, you know exactly where this story is going, right? American forces, spearheaded by the Marine Corp's Fifth Division, had endured unexpected and unconscionable casualties, and by day five had made little progress from the original beachhead. The Marines were becoming discouraged and fatalistic.

The highest point on the island was Mt. Suribachi, and division commanders expected that it would be heavily defended. Much to their surprise, a small patrol made it to the top of the mountain with few casualties, and reported this to one of the division commanders upon their return from patrol. Excited by the report, the division commander ordered a larger patrol to once again ascend the mountain, and gave them the battalion's small American flag with the order to raise it at the very peak of Mt. Surabachi. Once again faced with little resistance, the larger patrol found a piece of pipe left by the Japanese, hurriedly attached the flag to it, and lifted it into place above the detritus of the battle.

Being that it was the first time an American flag was raised over Japanese territory, the result among the American forces was electric. For just a few moments the Americans stopped fighting, and a collective cheer was raised from the front lines, the beaches, and the ships standing out to sea. Hearing the cheers and seeing the tiny flag waving over the island, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, standing on Iwo Jima's beach next to the Marine commander Lt. General Holland "Howling Mad" Smith, said, "Holland, this

means a Marine Corps for another 500 years.” We know the rest of the story – how the small flag was later swapped for a larger flag, and as it was raised Joe Rosenthal photographed the most iconic image in the history of warfare.

The power of inspiration must never be underestimated, but inspiration usually must be accompanied by some type of avatar – an image representing an idea that, when lifted up, lifts the hearts and minds of all those who see it. A flag can be such an image – the national anthem is the story of the American flag emerging out of the fog of war in Baltimore harbor, and the song and the image is created to inspire patriotic emotions. A banner or a statue can be inspirational, as can a powerful speech or sermon amplified over the heads of a rapt audience.

But just as an elevated image, song, or speech can be inspirational, it can also be discouraging: “I lift my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come?” When we hear that Psalm, we assume that the Psalmist was seeing something inspirational as the writer’s eyes were lifted to the mountains, but the context of Psalm 121 is exactly the opposite of inspirational. At the time this Psalm was written, Israel was surrounded by pagan nations, all of which built temples or altars on the peaks of their mountains. Even within Israel itself there were those who were worshipping the Canaanite gods at these altars, forsaking their trust in the God of the covenant.

As the Psalmist looks up to the hills, the writer sees the pagan altars, and feels despair at their presence. Since the dawn of civilization, people had been turning in desperation to lifeless idols for help and hope in a futile quest for peace and justice. Knowing that the gods were worthless, the Psalmist asked the question, “From where will my help come?” The Psalmists answered his own question with a powerful statement of faith – “ My help comes

from the Lord... .” Not the gods of stone and wood and human imagination, but “...the Lord who made heaven and earth.”

That Lord which the Psalmist praises was Israel’s hope for generations, and out of that hope the prophets lifted up the promise of the Lord’s Messiah, one who would reconcile all of creation to the love of God. But the promise of the Messiah became shrouded in the fog of Israel’s corrupt temple religion, which buried the Messianic dream under countless laws and a powerful, hereditary priesthood. That is the age in which Nicodemus lived, and though he was one of the powerful - a ruling elder on the Sanhedrin - he had not completely forsaken the Messianic hope of the ancient prophets.

Nicodemus had clearly been inspired by the ministry and presence of Jesus of Nazareth, but in his conversation it is clear that he does not understand the true implications of Christ’s presence. In the gospel of John, we see Nicodemus privately approach Jesus in the evening, which might indicate that it was already unsafe for any high official to be seen with him in public or in the light of day. Nicodemus tells Jesus what he has observed – that Jesus is clearly a Rabbi who has come from God and can perform signs.

Christ replies with a baffling statement – Nicodemus the elder is incapable of knowing anything about Christ, because he is not born from above. The ruler’s perplexity at Christ’s words is expressed in his own question: “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” Christ’s reply to Nicodemus is more cryptic than his initial statement: “Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.... Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

The Greek word for “wind” is “pneuma,” which also means “spirit.” Though “pneuma” can be understood in many ways, here it is clear that Jesus is speaking of the Holy Spirit, which is the driving force in the lives of all those who believe in him as the Messiah. Nicodemus life is driven by a religion of law and legalism – a religion which lifts up the law and the hierarchy that goes with it. It is a not life of spiritual call and response, but one of legalistic paralysis.

Jesus explains to Nicodemus that he can never acquire a spiritual life on his own through the practice of his religion – rather, something must be lifted up before the elder that will heal him of his spiritual blindness and change his heart: “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Nicodemus would immediately recognize Jesus reference to Moses, because it was a familiar story from the Hebrew scriptures. When the Hebrews were travelling through the wilderness toward the promised land, some were attacked by poisonous snakes, driving the people into a panic. God told Moses to create a standard to lift up before the people – the image of a serpent on a pole. Once the people saw the standard, they were healed from their panic, even as those who were bitten were healed of their wounds.

As Christians we know that Jesus was not referring to any human-made symbol, but his own death upon the cross, when the Son of God was lifted up before the eyes of all who would see him, and for the sake of those who were willing to embrace the gift of God’s grace – for Nicodemus, for all of creation, and for all time. The cross is still lifted up before

the eyes of the world, and for those who believe they receive the spiritual gifts of that lift – healing, guidance and hope.

Just as the elevation of the Caduceus healed God’s people in the wilderness, so does the Holy Spirit heal all those who lift up their hearts to see and embrace the cross of Jesus Christ, accepting its forgiveness. That acceptance is the only way out of the wilderness of sin and death that imprisons our lives. Once we are liberated from sin and death, we are then free to journey with purpose and meaning as the Spirit guides us, with lives that belong not to ourselves, but to God. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit also comes the inspiration of hope, which ever leads us out of dark places and into the warmth of Christ’s love. Our hope is expressed in our worship and our work, in our inner lives of spiritual intercourse, and the outer testimony of our discipleship. As Christ was lifted up for the sake of our salvation, so does our church, with the help of the Spirit, lift up the Son of God for the sake of healing, guiding, and inspiring the world.

Henri Nouwen in his book, “Return of the Prodigal Son” expresses why we can understand that which so mystified Nicodemus: “Confronted here with the impossibility of self-redemption, I now understand Jesus’ words to Nicodemus: “Do not be surprised when I say: ‘You must be born from above.’ ” Indeed, something has to happen that I myself cannot cause to happen. I cannot be reborn from below; that is, with my own strength, with my own mind, with my own psychological insights. There is no doubt in my mind about this because I have tried so hard in the past to heal myself...and failed ... and failed ... and failed, until I came to the edge of complete emotional collapse and even physical exhaustion. I can only be healed from above, from where God reaches down. What is impossible for me is possible for God.”

Nouwen perfectly describes the gift of lift – the healing, the guidance, and the hope that the pneuma, the Holy Spirit, provides for those who lift up their eyes and see the incarnation of God’s unconditional love in the form of a crucified man; a man lifted up for our sake and for the sake of all creation. He is our Mount Surabachi. He is our star-spangled banner, rising above the fog of our sinful hearts and our fallen world, to show us the path that leads us home.