

LENT 2 A—"The Edge"
FEBRUARY 17, 2008
GLORY OF GOD LC, WHEAT RIDGE
TEXT: JOHN 3:1-17 (NUMBERS 21:4-9)

It is dark.

You are drunk.

Sit down—

You are at the edge of the roof.

*(Jelaluddin Rumi) **

Did you have any idea?

Did you know, one more step, and down you'd go?

I feel fine, you said; I can handle myself.

**You thought you knew where you were going;
you thought you had a grip on things,
you thought you understood things;
you thought you had God in a box.**

First Vignette: Dale Catlin

I was confident; I was experienced; I was respected;
I had proved myself; top of my game.

It was alright, you know?

Really, life doesn't get any better than this.

But then the bottom dropped out.

He challenged me;
he said I didn't know what I was talking about.

I complimented him—I told him,
*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God;
for no one can do these signs that you do
apart from the presence of God.*

But he put me in my place:

**Are you a teacher of Israel,
and yet you do not understand these things?**

It is dark.

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Sit down—

You are at the edge of the roof.

They told me I was a leader, and they asked me to serve.

It was an honor, really; they trusted me,
they liked me, they asked me for advice;
they said I was the one to get things done.

So I accepted.

And you know, I was good.

Oh, not great, maybe, but I was good;
I had learned something from all I had been through;
I was proud of what I had accomplished;
it felt good.

But then I heard him speak.

I thought I was good, but he was amazing.

He held them in the palm of his hand;
he held me in the palm of his hand.

And I would have given everything,
all my position, all I had gained,
if I could figure out how he did it,
if I could know his secret.

He did things, you know?

No, I mean astonishing things, just about miraculous things.

No one can do signs like that apart from the presence of God.

“You don’t get it,” he said.

**“You talk about what you’ve earned;
I’m talking about all you’ve been given,
which doesn’t even come close to all that I can give you.”**

“I don’t need this,” I said, and I stood up to leave.

He didn’t move; he just said,

“You are not in control of your life, you never were.”

It is dark.

You are drunk.

Sit down—

You are at the edge of the roof.

Second Vignette: Jan Bryson

There were snakes everywhere, everywhere you look.

It was so bizarre; they just came out of nowhere.

You couldn’t pick up anything
—a book, a pot, a bag, a child, a toy, your laptop—
without a serpent crawling out from under it.

People were getting bitten, children were dying;
every day you’d hear about somebody else.

Oh, I know, there are modern-day plagues—
AIDs, cancer, heart disease, ethnic cleansing, economic recession.

But that stuff always happens to somebody else, not me.

I was afraid to go out, afraid to go to work, afraid to meet friends.

We didn't deserve this.

Didn't we prove ourselves at Hormah?

Didn't we show those Canaanites?

By God, we showed we could be trusted!

And now, by God, he was punishing us.

We'd done good; we deserved a little recognition, a little reward.

I guess we shouldn't have complained,

but the food really was terrible,

and the wilderness is a terrible place without water.

But I see it now:

Truth is, we didn't trust God anymore; we trusted ourselves.

We were full of ourselves,

thought we were in a position to make demands,

when we were only in a position to be grateful.

It's all a gift, do you know that?

It is dark.

You are drunk.

Sit down—

You are at the edge of the roof.

So Moses, he makes a serpent, of all things

—bronze, but just like the ones that were killing us—

and he puts it on a pole, where everybody could see it,

like a big bronze stop sign in neon colors.

And all you had to do was look at it.

Just stop looking at your own troubles and your misery,

stop looking at yourself for a minute,

and look at this thing,

this sign,

this God's way out.

I don't know anymore.

I don't know where trouble comes from;
 maybe God sends it,
 maybe we make enough trouble for ourselves;
 maybe it's punishment, the judgment we deserve;
 maybe nobody deserves some things;
 maybe God's to blame, maybe I'm to blame,
 maybe there's nobody to blame.

But I'll tell you what:

After something like that, you realize how beautiful life really is.

It's all a gift—do you know that?

Each day of it.

I wake up now, and I'm thankful just to be alive.

And I've been thinking:

God must love us;

why else would he want us to be better than we are? †

**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.**

It is dark.

You are drunk.

Sit down—

You are at the edge of the roof.

Third Vignette: Arne Niemeyer

I'm a Christian...Hah! There, I said it.

Oh, God, I don't know if I've ever told anyone that before!

I mean, actually said it. Out loud. Whew.

So, what do you think?

I'm looking for your reaction—that okay with you?

I mean, I'm not crazy;
 I'm not like those guys on TV,
 those Bible-thumpin' preachers,
 those abortion clinic bombers.

It's not like I'd stop you on a street corner and ask you, "Are you saved?"
 and not let you go until you knelt down and prayed
 or gave a donation or something.

I mean, I just go to church,
 with the wife, and the kids—
 it's good for the kids, you know?

No, that's not what I mean;
 I mean, I used to mean that,
 that's the way I used to think.

Well, I guess I still do, sometimes,
 but not really.

I go to church—that part's true.

Yeah, sometimes it's boring, I admit;
 there are times when even God would fall asleep.

But actually, I almost always get *something* out of it,
 and those weeks when I take a Sunday off
 to go hunting or skiing...
 well, I miss it, kind of—really.

I guess I've changed a little.

We've had some tough times, in my family.

It's not easy, you know—marriage, kids, stuff.

Yeah, you know; I don't have to tell you that.

But I don't believe that now—that's not what it's all about.

You know that Bible verse
 some guy always sneaks into every football game,
 that "John 3:16" sign—
 man, can't those guys ever leave it alone for a minute?
 They'd beat you over the head with it if they could,
 so I know you've heard it:

**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.**

Yeah, that's the one.

They hold it up like they were dangling you over the fire:
 "You're gonna perish, man;
 God's gonna drop you and you're gonna burn like a marshmallow.
 Start believing right now or your wienie is cooked."

But they never read you the next verse:

**Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world
 to condemn the world, but in order that
 the world might be saved through him.**

Do you get it?

God is not into condemnation—who'd have thought, huh?

In fact, I'll tell you what—
 God is not only not into condemnation,
 God is into eliminating condemnation!

God is not into blame;
 God is into not blaming anyone—not even you.

It's not about making you feel guilty, or making you feel bad;
 you know what you have to feel bad about it—
 everybody feels bad about something,
 I know you're not any different.

It's not about condemnation, it's about being 'saved.'

And I know, you've been beaten over the head with that one, too,
 but it's not what you think.

It's not about condemnation, it's about being saved,
 and being saved is not about feeling bad,
 it's about feeling...*alive*.

That's it—it's about eternal life;
 and eternal life is not just about pearly gates and golden streets
 and angels and no more beer
 (just kidding—that's not true, what you've heard;
 my pastor says, he thinks in heaven there *will be* beer,
 really good beer).

Eternal life isn't just about living forever,
 it's about living well,
 it's about living a full life,
 a life so full you can share it.

It's about getting everything out of your life
 that God put into it in the first place.

It's about starting over, new, every day,
 like you'd just been born,
 like you'd just been baptized.

It's a gift; it's all a gift—did you know that?

Amen.

* Opening poem by Jelaluddin Rumi (13th century Muslim poet)

† In Wendell Berry's novel, **Jaber Crow**, page 250 (New York: Counterpoint, 2000):
 "God loves Port William as it is," I thought.
 "Why else should He want it to be better than it is?"