

Changing

He was just 36 when the diagnosis of terminal cancer was given to him.

As he began his long meditation that he knew would include painful treatments and little hope of success, and because he is a poet, he wrote this:

My God my bright abyss
into which all my longing will not go
once more I come to the edge of all I know
and believing nothing believe in this:

There the poem ends.

And the question he leaves himself with, the question that lays before us as well, is; what is it we believe?

“Belief” is a funny word, especially for us Christians.

There’s tons of our Evangelical brothers and sisters who will tell you that the ticket to salvation is affirming one’s belief that Jesus is the Son of God.

That often translates into a code word for a kind of intellectual “I’m in,” a mental “I agree.”

But that kind of belief really has very little to do with what the gospels are telling us about what it is to follow this itinerant preacher from Galilee.

After all, I’m sure if we poll 100% of the Oklahoma kids who were chanting those disgraceful chants about black folks and lynching this week, why, they’d all say they believe Jesus is their Lord and Savior.

But that kind of belief, a belief that just sits in the head, that doesn’t change who we are nor direct the course of who we are becoming, well, that kind of belief is worse than useless; because it not only doesn’t transform, it cheapens to the point of worthlessness the meaning of Jesus for this world.

So the question might be asked: is belief enough, or is there something more?

I have a feeling that that’s the question that gets Nicodemus off his recliner late this night, after the evening news wraps up, after his family retires for the night — off he goes, in the dark, to find Jesus.

I wonder if Nicodemus, like so many modern Christians, feels that nudge that tells him that while believing the right things is all well and good, perhaps there is something more to a life lived in the nearer presence of God.

Is it enough simply to go to church, to recite the creeds, to receive the sacraments, or is there more to it?

I wonder if it is questions like these that motivate this prominent leader of the Pharisees to seek out the strange man from Nazareth?

When he finds Jesus, Jesus reminds him of the strange story from the old days of Moses, about snakes that bite – and snakes that cure.

The story Jesus tells recalls the image of two snakes facing each other – one with a poison that kills, and the other that cures.

And perhaps part of what Jesus is getting at tonight with Nicodemus is that to even dip our toe into the mystery that we call God, we have to face our own snakes, our own dark sides.

That we each of us has within, a darkness, a fear, a void, that we would rather not face – yet to run from it is, in some strange way, to run from God as well.

When we come face to face with those things in our lives that we would rather not acknowledge – somehow a door cracks open that leads us not into the void, but into the mystery that we call God.

My God my bright abyss
into which all my longing will not go
once more I come to the edge of all I know
and believing nothing believe in this.....

It's why we have this season of Lent.

It's why Jesus spends these same 40 days in the desert.

There is something about confronting our demons, things that have the capacity to wound or diminish and sometimes even destroy us, that becomes a passageway to the life of faith.

In that which can kill us is also that which can cure us.

Which means that a life of faith is not so much concerned with living scrupulously or following all the rules or being a stand up citizen – but a life of faith means surrendering all we are to the God who loves us enough to die for us.

When we say Jesus is like us in all ways, except sin – we don't mean he never gets angry or impatient or curses someone out – he does all of these things, plenty of times!

What we mean is he always surrenders to God, even as he faces his own demons in the desert, even as he awaits arrest and trial and execution.

That is what the faithful life looks like — that is what eternal life looks like.

When we face our own demons, we can then look outward to a world that so desperately needs to be healed.

And that is the call that each of us here has already responded to.

“Because following Jesus is not limited to a program of self-improvement; it's an invitation to be part of, to form, to create, a community.

It means changing relationships that stink of injustice and death, so that we might knit together relationships of healing, forgiveness, and abundance, which is the very definition of eternal life.

Just think about how much is determined by the where and how and what of our birth in this world.

Some are born in a city, state or country that accustoms them to unjust privilege.

Others are born in places that have no access to clean water, education, or even the chance to live to adulthood.

Some are born to families that instill a deep sense of love, while others are raised believing they are deeply inadequate.

Everyone is born with a skin color that conditions our sense of who we are, what we deserve, whom we may love, and whom we should fear.

At our birth, we arrive in a world ready to lock us into relationships based on our birth -- relationships that can and often do separate us from one another and from God.

So how might the world look if those patterns are exploded, if you and I, no matter the where or when or color or language of our birth — can be sisters and brothers in healthy relationships?

Let me put it this way:

What would our relationships look like if we shared one birth and were raised in one loving, supportive family?

What would our economy look like if we insisted that we live and work in a world that is our common inheritance, and not simply chunks of land and resources to be conquered?

What would our world look like if we accepted every child as our own little sister or brother, if "family first" means every human being is our own flesh and blood? Sarah Dylan Breuer, paraphrased.

Someone last week called me an idealist.

I'm not an idealist.

I, like you, am a follower of Jesus.

And it is in that following that we all find our hope, not only for life in the next world, but for abundant life in this world too.

My God my bright abyss
into which all my longing will not go
once more I come to the edge of all I know
and believing nothing believe in this.

+amen