

St. Nick's John Sermon, May 13th, 2018

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Paul Nicklen is a photographer who spends his time in the waters of the Arctic and the Antarctic, photographing wildlife. His job is not for the faint of heart; Nicklen often finds himself immersed in frigid waters, just a camera's length away from deadly predators. I heard him in an NPR interview describing his multi-day encounter with a female leopard seal.

Now, there is nothing cute and cuddly about leopard seals. They are an apex predator, fully grown they are often over 1000 pounds and 10-12 feet long, with huge heads and a mouthful of fearsome teeth. This seal showed up on one of his first days of a shoot in Antarctica. She proceeded to charge at Paul over and over, but once she had exhibited her dominance, and he had, wisely, accepted his place as below hers' in the food chain, she settled down and seemed to be mostly curious.

Every time he showed up for the next four days, there she would be. She would follow him back to his sailboat every evening. On the second day, she brought him a penguin chick; alive and struggling to get away. He says, "she would sort of line it up with me, and when it was lined up perfectly she would let it go, and it would swim off. She would catch it and try again; she did this over and over."

Nicklen realized that she was trying to feed him, or really, teach him how to feed himself, and getting REALLY frustrated, because he just couldn't seem to master this simple act of feeding himself. Eventually, she began to bring him dead

penguins. At one point he had five dead penguins floating around him and he was laughing so hard that he had to surface to re-seat his mask and regulator. Turns out it is hard to laugh under water, at least if you want to breathe at the same time. His would-be mother, the leopard seal, was so thoroughly disgusted with him at this point that she flipped a dead penguin onto the top of his head.

Nicklen freely admits that he fell in love with this seal who tried so hard to adopt him. He says he fell asleep every night with tears in his eyes thinking of how she tried to take care of him. Remembering her patience and her persistence and what felt so much like love to him. Yeah, he knew perfectly well that he was anthropomorphizing like mad, thinking of her as though she were a human being, but who cares? What he felt was the love.

So...I suppose it is just a tiny bit heretical to compare Jesus to a leopard seal, but here goes anyway. Because Jesus never gives up on any one of us. Jesus has endless patience and persistence. No matter how wrong we get it, Jesus keeps trying, keeps loving.

Take today's Scripture about poor old "Doubting Thomas." AND, all of the other disciples. All of the other disciples, who are locked in a house, afraid to go out. Jesus has been resurrected, has appeared to Mary Magdalene, and she, following Jesus' orders, told the disciples all about it. But they aren't having any. They aren't about to go out there until...until what? Well, we don't know what, but Jesus does.

He comes to them, behind those locked doors, and speaks to them. Speaks, “Peace”, and breathes on them. Breathes the Holy Spirit on them, and commissions them to take his word out into the world. This is the Gospel of John’s version of Pentecost, with the tongues of fire replaced by Jesus’ breath, echoing God’s breath over the waters of Creation in the beginning of the beginning.

So, that’s that, right?!? The disciples are now apostles, “those who are sent out”. Well, no, not quite. In fact, not hardly. The Scripture tells us that “a week later” they are still in the house and Thomas is with them this time. It appears that they were still behind locked doors, because Jesus comes to them again, “although the doors were shut”.

“Doubting Thomas”. This is what Wikipedia has to say, “A doubting Thomas is a skeptic who refuses to believe without direct personal experience.

As though Thomas was the only disciple who doubted. As though Mary Magdalene hadn’t failed to recognize the risen Jesus until he called her by name. As though Peter hadn’t doubted Jesus’ power and let fear cause him to deny Jesus three times. As though the 10 disciples locked in the room Sunday night hadn’t been paralyzed by fear before Jesus appeared to them. Not one of them remembered Jesus’ promise that he would be back, that he would appear to them. And now here they are, a week later, still stuck in that room.

Maybe Thomas was afraid to believe. I don't know where he was when fear led the others to lock themselves in that room; maybe he was too scared even to hang around, but I think we need to forgive him for being fearful. After all, Jesus was okay with it. Jesus knew what Thomas needed and let him touch the wounds. Because Jesus, with his endless patience and persistence, will go as far as it takes to reach and love everyone. Where they are, as they are.

I'm going to hope that Jesus breathed on Thomas, the way he did on the others the week before. Because I'm guessing what Jesus breathed on them was hope, was strength, was the beginning of their new life of purpose. What Jesus removed from the disciples with his breath was fear, because fear is the real enemy here. The disciples were locked into their room by fear, and Thomas, I'm guessing was locked in his own mind from fear.

Fear was essentially what crucified Jesus. Fear drove those who hailed Pilate when he brought his military might in through the Northern Gate to Jerusalem while Jesus came into the Eastern gate on his little donkey to the waving of palms by his supporters.

Fear and greed. Many folks profited from Roman rule. I'm afraid my mind goes straight to the Monty Python sketch from "Life of Brian" where, in plotting insurrection against the Romans, the supposedly rhetorical question, "What have the Romans ever done for us?", is asked. The increasingly irritating answer is parceled out...the aqueduct...sanitation...the

roads...irrigation...medicine...education...and, finally, peace. All, of course, at the cost of freedom, and all of these things benefited the well-to-do. The poor, as so often, got shafted.

But those who were afraid of losing their privilege, and those who were just plain afraid, greeted Pilate's entrance, while those who had heard or heard about Jesus and had been convicted that he was, indeed, the Messiah, greeted Jesus.

Fear is also what led to the cross. Please, let's not blame "the Jews". It wasn't the main body of "the Jews". It was those same Jews who profited from Roman rule. After all, ALL of Jesus' followers, and Jesus himself, were Jewish. But most of them were too poor to have material power, so they didn't have any say in who got crucified. And fear even drove most of them away at the end, even "faithful" Peter.

And now here we are, back in that locked room, smelling of fear and doubt, a week after the resurrection. With Thomas. Thomas just wanted proof. He wanted to make sense of this story that Jesus was back. Which, I imagine, he was desperate to believe.

It is certainly true that human beings really, really like to make sense of stuff. In general, we don't care for mysteries, except insofar as we can solve them. The mysteries that need to remain mysteries, like, oh, say...GOD...sometimes make us a teeny bit uncomfortable. So we make up explanations for God and God's works.

A couple of years ago, I was slogging through a book called, "The Particle at the End of the Universe", about the

search and possible discovery of the Higgs boson, an extremely elusive elementary particle that is at the far edge of what we know, and the discovery of which could go a long way towards unifying a theory that will, eventually, sort of, explain why stuff actually exists. Which is to say, why stuff has mass. Some science journalists actually called it “The God particle”, though it must be said that physicists hated that term.

I was trying to revive my long-ago and never very deep knowledge of physics. The book is written for a fairly well-informed lay person, meaning the story is told with words rather than mathematics, which is a good bloody thing for me at this stage of my life.

As I struggled with concepts of quantum physics, string theory and other pieces of 21st century physics, I couldn't help but think of the many folks I know who only believe and trust what they can see and touch. And I realized, that, sadly for them, at a quantum level we actually CAN'T believe what we can see and trust. Because the act of observation freezes the action at a point in time that is really only a statistical probability. The act of observation influences what is “really” there. So it isn't “really” there. Does that make sense?

However, there are patterns that underlie all of these observations, these statistical probabilities, and I see God in those patterns rather than the static absolutes, and the Holy Spirit in the vibrations and the energies that power this world.

And anyhow, it is really, really okay to just stand in the now, right where we are, rather than become stuck in thinking

about what we don't know. What the disciples didn't know was the stuff that had them frozen in fear. In order to become apostles, those who are sent out, Jesus had to un-stick them.

Un-sticking is what Jesus does for all who believe in Him. Jesus breathes courage into us when we ask for help. Jesus is always present with us but we forget. We forget that Jesus points us down the right path, then walks beside us on that path. One little step at a time, always pointing out the next right move. IF we are paying attention, if we don't let the distractions of the world pull us off course.

Jesus meets us where we are, with infinite patience and persistence. If Thomas needs to touch and prod, ok, let him. If others recognize him in the breaking of the bread, then share a meal with them. Jesus is always looking to calm our fears, show us that resurrection is real and always a possibility. I've seen it. I've touched it. I've experienced it.

I've seen a faithful congregant of my outdoor church, a longtime addict, who was nearly always there and ready to help with whatever needed doing. Some days he did better than other days, but he always tried his best. I've seen his surprise when we asked him to help institute Communion and I've seen him begin to think that if he could be trusted with something that precious, then maybe he WAS worth saving. And I watched him decide to ask for and accept God's mercy and begin the long, hard, uncertain climb to sobriety and resurrection.

Because resurrection doesn't mean we are ignoring what came before. We may still be wounded; we may never be fully

healed. But we are transformed by being held by Jesus. By being told that we are precious in God's sight.

Many of us are barricaded in some locked room that seems impossible to leave. We are frozen in fear and indecision. We need Jesus to breathe on us, to breathe peace, to breathe courage, to take us by the hand and walk through that locked door with us.

Jesus knew exactly who Thomas was and what Thomas needed. Thomas couldn't picture Jesus resurrected. He needed, desperately, to touch Jesus. And Jesus, being Jesus, said, "Sure, go ahead". And then Thomas believed. He replied, "My Lord and my God".

Jesus knows exactly what we need as well. He is just waiting for us to ask.

God's promise is that God will always be right there with you. Jesus will always be walking beside you. In 2Cor, chapter 12, when Paul complains about the thorn in his side that causes him such agony, God doesn't take the thorn out, God lets him know that, "my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness". God isn't going to cure Paul, because that isn't how God works, but God's grace will give him the strength he needs to keep on keeping on. Or, as Anne Lamott says, "Grace bats last". For Thomas, for us.

"Grace bats last".

Amen.