

“COMING TO GOD BY NIGHT”

Sermon by Rev. Patty Farr

Based on John 3:1-17 and Worship Drama: “The Black Hole”

February 17, 2008

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Have you ever felt as if you had a “black hole” right in the center of your life? It’s that feeling of emptiness, which just grows deeper and darker and blacker and more frightening the more we try to fill it with the wrong things. Sometimes we feel this black hole when we don’t really have a sense of meaning or purpose in our lives. We sense the black hole when we’ve just lost a loved one, or have undergone a break-up or divorce, or have lost a job or moved away from the home we grew up in. We may experience the black hole when we’ve been in conflict with a family member or friend, and the conflict makes us feel all worn out and lonely and unloved. The black hole can come upon us when we become depressed, perhaps by the relentless winter season, the darkness, the cold, the snow and ice and freezing rain. The black hole can also make itself felt when we least expect it, when we think we should be happy, because everything’s going reasonably well in our lives, yet a nagging emptiness haunts us. We find ourselves silently asking, “What is life all about, anyway? What am I doing with my life? Why isn’t my job more fulfilling? Why aren’t my relationships working out better? Why do I feel so tired and listless? So anxious and afraid? What is the purpose of my life? Is there any purpose at all?” There it is – the black hole. This is a dark time indeed, and many of us have felt it. Maybe you are feeling it this morning.

In the drama, we were introduced to a couple struggling with their own black holes. We first met Joe Average Guy. At first he thinks he’s got life by the horns. He thinks he’s in control of his life, the master of his fate, the captain of his ship. Uh-oh, we can all see where this is headed. Remember when you thought you could control your life? You thought that by sheer positive thinking and good intention, you could make everything turn out right. You thought that by being energetic, smart and aggressive, you could beat out the competition. It just takes a little time and a little experience to outgrow this illusion. Whenever we hear a little too much of the “SELF” word – “self-made, self-sufficient, self-contained,” we should know enough to translate it as, “self-deluded.” Most of us who have embarked on a spiritual journey come to learn, through trial and error, that

we can't really fill our emptiness with SELF. In fact, SELF just makes us feel emptier than ever!! Talk about a black hole – whenever the main ingredients of our lives are “me, myself, and I,” we know we're about to plunge into the mother of all black holes – what we might call the infinite abyss!

But if focusing on “self” isn't the solution to our emptiness, what is? Maybe it's falling in love! Ah-hah! Joe Average Guy promptly falls in love with Jane Average Girl, and what happens? Bells ring. Fireworks explode. All their prayers have been answered! Joe and Jane can fill their black holes *with each other*, and, as Jane declared, “O.D. on happiness as long as they both shall live.” ☺ Isn't that what we all secretly believed the first time we fell in love – that the other person would be the answer to all our problems, all our doubts and fears, all our insecurities and inadequacies, all our feelings of emptiness, meaninglessness, and even existential dread? Yikes – that's a pretty tall order! But hey, we're in love! We thought we could O.D. on happiness as long as we had that other person to fulfill and complete us. “Ah,” the narrator sighs, “what bliss!”

But pretty soon, just two weeks in Joe and Jane's case, the bliss wears off and the honeymoon is over. The honeymoon inevitably comes to an end for each and every one of us, no matter how perfect the relationship we have found. We realize, painfully, that no person can complete us. We were never *meant* to be completed by another person. But of course we don't get this when we're still gazing adoringly into our beloved's eyes. The truth doesn't hit us until our loved one has an argument with us, comes home late from work, forgets Valentine's Day, neglects to move the laundry into the dryer so it gets all mildewed, criticizes our hair or our weight or our outfit, or commits some other foul and inexcusable offense. We gradually come down to earth from our infatuation and realize that we haven't found the answer to all our problems simply by falling in love with that perfect person. We still have our lives to live, we still have to figure out what we are here to be and to do, and we still have this darn black hole in our very center that we haven't yet learned how to fill.

At this point in our journey through life, and in fact at every point along the way, God tries to intervene. While we are busy trying to stuff our emptiness with selfish pursuits or with the excitement of romance, God is gently whispering, “Hey, average person, remember me? I'm here! I want to help! I know what to do with your emptiness! In fact, I know how to fill it! Please let me.” But do we hear God? No, we often do not. We're much too busy making other plans.

In Jane and Joe's case, they are now busy filling up their social calendar. “My friends have given me a new sense of worth!” exclaims Jane. “My friends have given me a more accurate self concept!” brags Joe. But even as they speak, they know it isn't quite true. While friends are wonderful, we once again come to discover, with much disappointment, that no person outside ourselves can ever fill this hole that is in the center of our being. Friends eventually let us down, disappoint us, get mad at us, misunderstand us, place boundaries around the friendship, or forget to call us back.

It's the same with all the people and places and things and activities and accomplishments we try to stuff into our black holes. We may try to get lost in fun and recreation, in expensive vacations and dream houses, in racquetball and bike racing and skiing and snowmobiles. We may try to lose ourselves in movies and in books, or in more dangerous forms of entertainment such as gambling, drinking, drugs, or an illicit affair. No matter what we may try to place into the black hole in our lives, we will still, at the end of the day, come up empty.

St. Augustine, one of the most important figures in the ancient Western church, was born in North Africa in the 4th century. As a young man, Augustine was a playboy, a hedonist who loved to eat, drink and be merry. He tried all kinds of sensual and earthly delights in order to satisfy himself. But all the while he just became more lost and empty. It took him years to finally hear God's still small voice calling to him. In fact, he came to discover that the hole in the center of his life was a God-shaped hole, and only God could really fit into it. Listen to the words of his prayer to God, recorded in his memoir known as The Confessions: "Late have I loved you, O beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I found you. You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would not have been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more...."

To me, those are some of the sweetest, most beautiful words ever penned by a person on a spiritual journey. Augustine knew the pain of living with a black hole, and he finally came to know the indescribable joy of spending the rest of his life seeking to fill that hole with God, and God alone. Page Zyromski, writer of a Catholic daily devotion, explains that "We're born with a God-shaped hole in our hearts...It's a space for God alone. Nothing but God will fit the God-shaped hole. [Lent] is our time to unclog that hole, to clear out all the litter. What obstructions are blocking the space we give to God in our lives? Are we offering [God] a temporary parking place...or a permanent dwelling? If we're faithful to this season...something wonderful happens. We want to give God more and more room. The feeling lasts longer and longer... The God-shaped hole enlarges! Each year it widens. Like a dilated pupil in the eye, people see more and more of God in us and less and less of [us]. We're able to say with John the Baptist and the great saints, "He must increase [while] I must decrease."

This is exactly what began to happen to Nicodemus, the learned Jewish rabbi. Remember when he came to Jesus by night because he felt so empty, even with all his knowledge of God and his power as a religious leader in his community? Nicodemus could feel the black hole growing in the center of his life. He knew something was missing. All his head knowledge about God, all his wisdom about the rules and the

regulations and the scriptures wasn't bringing about a deep, personal transformation in Nicodemus' life.

So what did Jesus say to him? "You must be born anew!" Jesus knew that the black hole in the center of Nicodemus' life was about to become the dark womb out of which new life would spring. All his searching and his yearning and his struggle to understand his own inner emptiness had led Nicodemus to this most beautiful and grace-filled moment in his life – this moment of encounter with Christ himself, the Light of the World. Nicodemus was about to be born anew.

Take a look at the front cover of your bulletin. Here we have Nicodemus, so humble even in his greatness that in his desperate search for truth, he allows himself to roll up into a little ball and re-enter the dark womb of his own soul. He discovers there fresh air, light, and water - all the ingredients to nurture new life. He allows himself to imagine the possibility of new way of living, with God at his center.

One day we realize that the God-shaped hole in our heart, is no longer a hole – it's become the beautiful birthplace for our spirit! St. John of the Cross, a 16th century Spanish mystic, wrote what is now a very famous treatise called Dark Night of the Soul. John knew about darkness; he knew about black holes. Brought before the Spanish Inquisition, put on trial, condemned, beaten, tortured and imprisoned, St. John managed to birth new life. "O night that guided me," he wrote, "O night more lovely than the dawn, O night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed in the Beloved!...I abandoned and forgot myself, laying my face on my Beloved; all things ceased; I went out from myself, leaving my cares, forgotten among the lilies. " It turns out that our black hole is actually the warm, safe, dark womb out of which we will emerge as new beings, ready to allow God to be our Beloved, our Center, our All in All. "For God so loved the world..." that God made a plan before the beginning of time to fill our every emptiness with love and beauty and truth.

What a wild, wonderful, dark sea journey we are all on, once we stop trying to fill our darkness with lesser things. This Lent, prepare for your rebirth!

Let us pray... Late have we loved you, O beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have we found you. You were within us, but we were outside...You called, you shouted, and you broke through our deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled our blindness. You breathed your fragrance on us; we drew in breath and now we pant for you. We have tasted you, now we hunger and thirst for more....Thank you for filling our darkness with your light. AMEN.

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