

The following is a scene from a famous movie scene, can you name the movie? “I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am.” Comes from the classic film *On the Waterfront* (1954) when Terry Malloy, the character played by Marlon Brando, complains to his brother over a fight he was asked to throw so the local union boss played by Lee J. Cobb could win more money. Terry had been a promising young boxer but that night ended his dream and set the course for his whole life.

Nobody wants to be a nobody. We all want to feel that our lives matter, that we are important to someone, that we can make a difference. In Jesus, God expresses ultimate love and concern for us, and God’s affirmation makes life worth living.

Nobody is a nobody! One way of summarizing and emphasizing the powerful, life-changing meaning and message of Jesus is just this - Nobody is a nobody!

In this well-known and powerful passage in John 3 we see and hear Jesus unpacking His own self-understanding of what it meant and means for Jesus to be human and live among us and for us. Jesus tells us very, very clearly that His purpose, was not – repeat - was not, to scare us into compliance with the divine will. Instead, Jesus describes His coming in which all are offered the joy, the wonder, the hope within which God wants all Creation to dwell.

Jesus came to say and show that God does not want us to continue to hurt each other and the rest of creation, and that when we turn from our own ways, abundant life will overflow for us.

God’s goal in the coming of Jesus was not to denounce and condemn the world, not to repeat the Flood, something God promised never to repeat. God’s goal is all about God loving, and saving the world. Amidst all our imperfections and sin, even among the best of us, Jesus still speaks of God as loving the world, not hating or destroying.

God came in the flesh to save us not by taking us out of our flesh, but by teaching us to live in our flesh.

God came in the flesh not to make us other than human, but to teach us how to be human – bearing in our living the image of God, the image in which we are made.

The God we meet in Jesus Christ is not the disinterested, dispassionate god of Greek speculation. The God we meet in Jesus is a lover, the divine lover. This God, this Jesus-God is a passionate, committed, faithful, devoted, tireless, reckless, shameless, wanton lover, who loves and accepts even the unlovely. God’s love is freely offered and as it is freely accepted, by people like you and I, this love, this God, given and received love, starts to change us, bringing about in us, God’s new birth. Being born again, being born from above, is not something we do for ourselves. Instead, being born anew, born from above, being born again, is all about what God brings about in us as we receive God’s love, we are changed by God’s Love and forgiveness. This rebirth is not only relevant to the afterlife, it is all about changing us and bringing us hope and describing how we are to live in this life.

[++ SING ++] “Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide, to escape from reality.”

[++ SING ++] “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

Two of my all-time favorite songs! One by Queen, and the second by U2. Both of which, in their own way, ask the most basic human questions, asked by among others, Nicodemus, Where am I going?

What are we going to do? Who are we and what is our purpose?

In some comments on this meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus, preacher and author, Will Willimon, wrote: “There are some churches, I hope not ours, that seem to be able to be with Jesus only in the light, never in the night. I tell you, sometimes, there is nothing worse than that bright, “happy church.” Do you know what I’m talking about? Some churches are just so happy, so full of praise and celebration, that they make you feel guilty if you happen to come in with a bit of shadow in your soul. To be someone who is going through a time of darkness or pain and to enter a “happy church” – with grinning clergy, and smiling ushers, and everything so positive, so upbeat, glorious, and grand – can be terribly depressing!”

Yes, I think I understand what he is describing... Sure, we never want church to be boring, there is no merit in lack of beauty, joy, or interest, but neither is church only for those who have it all together. Church is not a self-help club with a special divine additive. Church is community, the community of the loved sinners, the redeemed broken ones. As such we are all involved encountering and sharing in the hard, difficult things that people and families endure. Church includes but is not limited to the cheery prospect of, “Welcome to MOES” or “Come inside the Disney Store”.

Church is the community of Jesus Christ accepting each other especially in the reality of our need and pain!

Church is the community of Jesus Christ stepping outside of our own needs and wishes to stand with and for others who need our support.

Church is the community of Jesus Christ together praying, working, serving the least and the lost and the last!

I thought the following story was fascinating, and as a story might free us to live more fully and openly: “A few years ago, a young man was discovered hiding in a large church. A maintenance worker discovered him one day. He had been lurking in the church, living in the attic, spending his day in darkness, only venturing forth during the night to prowl about the church, feeding on leftovers from church suppers, moving about in the building only at night, listening in on the daily activities of the congregation. From his secret hideaway in the attic he heard the counseling in the pastor’s office, the discussion at Bible Study, the cries from the nursery, the motions moved and seconded at the Church Board meeting, he even heard the things members were “whispering” about in the hallway!”

Do you know anyone who is hiding in this church?

Are you or is someone you know, hiding here amongst us?

Do you know someone who is present, but not really, someone on the boundary, at the edge?

Maybe some who is uninvolved, under-involved, even overinvolved, fearful that if people really knew them that they would be excluded?

Someone whose pain is so great that they long to be accepted but fear being encountered?

Do you feel like you are a nobody?

Do you know someone else who believes or is tempted to imagine that they are a nobody?

And if so, what would it take for you, what would it take for that person to come out of the dark into the light?

It is my aim, it is the aim of all the leaders and staff of the church to make sure that all of you, all of you here in this Sanctuary, all of you watching on TV, all the people who come to share or are somehow touched by the life of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church are helped to discover and trust

and experience that you matter to God, that you are loved by God, that you are one who is loved by God and that in this church you have and can find a place of welcome, that here there is for you a community within which you can make your fullest and most faithful contribution in response to the love that God has for you and for all people.

Lent is not only a season for denial it is a season for stepping out of the shadows and moving forward in the life of faith and commitment.

I would invite each of you to identify one step you might take, to step out of the shadows closer to God's purpose for your life.

I would invite you to notice someone to whom you can best reach out to with the news that they are special and important to God? Someone who needs from you - a word of encouragement, a word of hope, a promise of prayer – that will be to them the loving promise from God.

No matter who we are, where we are, where we have been, by taking just a small step forward, we will, like Nicodemus, will find ourselves in the most amazing place – we will find ourselves in the presence and company of Jesus – the One who came to seek and save us and all the lost, the Jesus who offers us life with God and life with purpose today and always. Jesus the One who names us all and declares that no one is a nobody that we are all somebody, somebody special to God!

Nicodemus heard, saw, received the promise of God's love first hand from Jesus. In the Gospel of John the theme of light and darkness is extremely important and expressive. And so the detail that Nicodemus comes to Jesus "at night" is crucial. Nicodemus listens and debates with Jesus and eventually disappears back "into the night." All that Jesus said to him will take time to take root and grow and it will not be until after the crucifixion of Jesus that we discover Nicodemus in the daylight as he assist in the burial of Jesus. Sometimes it takes time for us to truly and fully receive and respond to the call and the tug of faith.

The events at the heart of the seasons of Lent and Easter, the life, death, and rising again of Jesus, are God's extended, epic, engaging, emotive, eloquent, exciting, enabling, extroverted, exuberant, eternal love song to you all and to the world. So please pay attention, listen! Listen, and hum along, catch the tune! Listen, learn the lyrics and sing along! Sing softly, sing firmly, sing aloud of God's love! Step out of the shadows and into God's most glorious light. The light into which you will step, God's light, will bring you life and will inspire you to handle and deal with all the hard and difficult things you and yours are facing in life today or at any time in the future. This light also means that you have the opportunity in your words and actions to do and share and say something very powerful with and for all manner of people – to demonstrate to them that with God, nobody is a Nobody, and that here at Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church there is a place for all people.

Thanks be to God, in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, all of us share God's great good news - Nobody is a nobody! We all belong, we all matter to God! Nobody is a nobody! Everybody is a somebody, held and embraced by God in the love of Jesus Christ, who came, "not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Amen.