

WHEN WE FALL IN LOVE WITH THE NIGHT

a sermon by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno delivered on January 2, 2022

based on John 1:1-5

The wonderful genius of the violin, Joshua Bell, is best known for recording the music for the haunting movie, THE RED VIOLIN. Bell owns a very famous Stradivarius violin known as the Gibson Stradivarius. It has a pretty interesting history.

Made in 1713 in Cremona, Italy, it had been owned by Bronislaw Huberman, a remarkable old-school violinist of the first half of the 20th century. Huberman was performing a concert at Carnegie Hall in 1936. He was using a Guinarius violin that evening and had left his Stradivarius in his dressing room. . . . Then it disappeared . . . for 50 years. After a few years Huberman gave up hope of finding the instrument and accepted a check for \$30,000 from Lloyds of London.

Then, nearly 50 years later, in 1985 an old man, Julian Altman, was dying and, according to his wife, on his death bed he told her he had a terrible secret to confess. That violin he had been playing for their entire marriage he had stolen half a century before from Carnegie Hall and had been playing it in smoky cafes for all those 50 years; playing it for people having anniversary suppers and birthdays and romantic rendezvous.

In that time it had built up so much grime it was nearly black, but the man could not take it anywhere to be properly cleaned knowing that any violin maker would recognize it as a "Strad" immediately and would wonder why someone with his mediocre talent could own such an instrument.

Well, I thought the story fascinating and dug a little deeper. I found out his wife wasn't totally naïve about the instrument. She knew very well it's worth all along. She received quite a nice finder's fee when she let Lloyd's know where it was after her husband's death. But most interesting to me was Julian Altman's upbringing. His mother recognized his musical talent, and he had some early success.

As a young man he played for the National Symphony in Washington, D.C. Julian Altman's mother pushed him, but not in the way you'd imagine. Money

was more important to her than his fame. She figured he'd never make a lot of money, so she told him that her fondest wish for him was that one day he might *steal* a really good violin.

Now we could just write her off as, you know, *the mother from hell*, but what I want to know is what conditions in this world lead people to come up with that kind of dream for their children, and for the child to take it up?

Maybe it's just a case of someone who is raised in the darkness who has no clue at all about what it might feel like to dwell in the light.

The text that is set for this morning offers us a Christian understanding of this conundrum; a context in which God so loved the world—the whole world – so much that God sent a remarkably wise, compassionate, vulnerable Palestinian peasant, not to condemn us; heavens no, but to free us to begin living a full, exuberant, joyful life.

And yet today's Gospel also proclaims the sad truth that "the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light." How else do you explain someone like Julian Altman?

How do you explain people who continue to believe "the big lie" or any number of other ridiculous conspiracy theories having to ignore a constant stream of ample evidence to the contrary?

God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn us . . . and thus drive us further into the darkness. No, God sent Jesus to show us what an unnecessary burden living in the darkness is, and to thus coax us into the light.

For some of us, to believe that is to reclaim a bit of the lightness of childhood.

Remember Hans Christian Andersen's children's tale -- *The Emperor's New Clothes*? We heard it referred to often during the previous presidential administration, but let me tell it to you again.

A vain Emperor who cares for nothing but his appearance and regal attire hires two tailors who are really swindlers that promise to fashion for him the finest

suit of clothes ever woven from a fabric that will be invisible to anyone who is unfit for his position.

The Emperor is horrified when he watches them weaving and cannot see the cloth himself, so he pretends that he can, for fear of appearing unfit to be king; his ministers do the same.

When the swindlers report that the suit is finished, they pretend to dress him and the Emperor then marches down his empire's main street in procession before his subjects *who play along with the pretense*, believing that only the hopelessly stupid can't see his impressive attire.

Suddenly, a child in the crowd, too young to understand the idiotic pretense, blurts out that the Emperor is wearing nothing at all, and the cry is taken up by others who are sick of living in a world of lies. The Emperor cringes, suspecting the assertion is true, but holds himself up proudly and continues his naked procession.

It's *called* a tale for children, but it's really a tale for adults who hate hypocrisy and who want to reclaim the best part of being a child.

Precisely two years ago our Chief Justice, John Roberts, produced a year-end report from his high seat on our highest court. His words were scarily prophetic of the events that would happen exactly one year later on January 6th, perpetrated by a deluded mob at our nation's Capitol Building.

Justice Robert's began with a story about one of the writers of the Federalist Papers, John Jay.

In the winter of 1788, New York newspapers reported accounts that medical students were robbing graves so they could practice surgery on cadavers. In April, the chatter gelled into a rumor that students at New York Hospital were dissecting a schoolboy's recently deceased mother.

This was a "big lie" in its time – one that spread like the fires in Colorado a few days ago.

An angry mob stormed the hospital, and the mayor gave some of the medical staff refuge in the city jail. When the mob marched on the jail, John Jay, who lived nearby, grabbed his sword and joined Governor Clinton to quell the riot.

In the ensuing commotion, a rioter struck Jay in the head with a rock, knocking him unconscious and leaving him, according to one account, with "two large holes in his forehead." Alexander Hamilton and James Madison pressed the Federalist project forward while Jay recovered from his injuries.

It is sadly ironic that John Jay's efforts to educate his fellow citizens about the Framers' plan of government fell victim to a rock thrown by a rioter motivated by a rumor.

Happily, Hamilton, Madison, and Jay ultimately succeeded in convincing the public of the virtues of the principles embodied in the Constitution. Those principles leave no place for mob violence. But in the ensuing years, we have come to take democracy for granted, and civic education has fallen by the wayside. In our age, when social media can instantly spread rumor and false information on a grand scale, the public's need to understand our government, and the protections it provides, is ever more vital.

well, I wonder how many people paid any heed to Justice Roberts warnings or even remember them. The jury, so to speak, is out on whether the justices further to Robert's right on the court will listen to his very recent warnings about the importance of Constitutional precedent when they are deciding the cases of huge consequence that are now before them.

You know, so much of our current political troubles has been driven not only by ignorance of the Constitution, but also by terrible readings of the Bible and puny theology.

Last February a coalition of 100 evangelical Christian leaders condemned the role of "radicalized Christian nationalism" in feeding the political extremism that led to the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. Among other things they said ...

"We recognize that evangelicalism, and white evangelicalism in particular, has been susceptible to the heresy of Christian nationalism because of a long

history of faith leaders accommodating white supremacy. We choose to speak out now because we do not want to be quiet accomplices in this on-going sin."

I don't know how much credence rank and file evangelicals gave them. I despair about it as we approach the one-year anniversary of the appalling event.

Well, let me invite us to look at this morning's text.

"Now, there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus and it says. "He came to Jesus by night." (John 3:1-2) A leader in the community, a member of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Judaism, Nicodemus was prominent, respected and secure.

Scholars remind us that the author of John's Gospel uses a lot of symbolism and the fact that Nicodemus waits till after dark to come to see Jesus may be symbolic language meant to communicate that the light of the world enters into the darkness of human history.

However, it may simply mean that Nicodemus did not want to be seen, that it would not be prudent for this prominent man to be observed talking with Jesus, the humble rabbi from Nazareth, in broad daylight.

He was taking a chance going to see Jesus, but something about Jesus grabbed him, uprooted him, made it so he couldn't stay away. It was like there was the voice of a little child speaking truth within him, not unlike the one in Hans Christian Anderson's story.

For 2000 years Jesus has had that effect on people who are seeking:

Some years ago there appeared a book written by Howard Mumma, a retired Methodist minister, in which he described a series of conversations he had with the very famous and distinguished French existentialist author, Albert Camus.

Mumma served the American church in Paris in the 1950's and he remembered noticing a familiar looking man in a dark suit surrounded by admirers.

It was Camus, a hero to the French after the war, an existentialist who had learned from Jean Paul Sartre that human beings are alone in the universe, that the immediate moment, the immediate experience, is all there is and all any of us may ever hope for.

However, Camus loved to listen to Marcel Dupre play the great organ there. He also began to stay, to listen to more than the sublime music of Bach and eventually struck up a friendship with Mumma that resulted in conversations about faith and religion.

There were always rumors that Camus was actually a sympathizer, if not a Christian believer. Mumma recalls him saying during a conversation one evening ...

"The reason I have been coming to church is because I am seeking. I'm almost on a pilgrimage—seeking something to fill the void I am experiencing . . . I am searching for something the world is not giving me. I have been thinking a great deal about the concept of the transcendent, something that is other than this world."

Camus knew the Bible. He knew that major Biblical characters, Jonah, Moses, Isaiah, were not confident, self-assured believers, but unsure, questioning, seekers. The Hebrew prophet, Isaiah was virtually paralyzed by his experience of God. But it was Nicodemus who most intrigued Camus and with whom he identified as "a wise man of Israel, seeking something he did not have."

Camus asked the same question Nicodemus asked -- What does it mean to be "born from above" as the gospel writer John phrases it? Mumma's answer was a good one: "To me, to be born from above is to enter anew or afresh into the process of spiritual growth. It is knowing when you are ready to move ahead, to commit yourself to a new life, a spiritual pilgrimage."

Camus, Mumma reports, said that was what he was ready to spend the rest of his life exploring.

Sadly, his life was cut short soon after. Or, perhaps death served to be an early step in his pilgrimage. (The Christian Century, "Conversations with Camus," June 7, 2000).

Looking into the writing of Camus you can see how he was opening, almost imperceptibly, like a flower to the morning sun. He is remembered to have written -

[I]f there is a sin against life, it consists perhaps not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life and in eluding the implacable grandeur of this one..

But Camus also confesses the following, *Beauty is unbearable; it drives us to despair, offering us for a minute the glimpse of an eternity that we should like to stretch out over the whole of time.*

Beauty – think of the beauty that drew him to the Paris church to hear the organ music of Marcel Duprey. Think of the beauty of Jesus that drew Nicodemus out on the dark night in which he found himself longing for light.

Beauty – Mike Stiler of Lincolnville, Maine tells this harrowing story of opening to beauty one night when he found himself, like Nicodemus, on a kind of pilgrimage.

Several years ago I got lost in the woods while hiking. It was the day after Halloween, and a night of wind and rain had blown the remaining leaves from the trees, covering the trail. Before I knew it, I had wandered off-track and gotten lost. I was a long way from home, no one knew where I was, and the light was fading fast.

After a couple of hours of going in circles, I felt panic begin to rise in my gut, and my senses became remarkably sharp, as if to better enable me to deal with the emergency. The smell of the knee-deep fallen leaves seemed to permeate my whole being.

I recall standing transfixed by the silhouettes of naked branches against the fast-moving clouds. It was as though I were seeing clouds and branches for the first time.

What happened next is that everything I had thought of as “my life” quietly ended, like a leaf dropping from a tree. There was no longer a “me” who was lost. There was only beauty. Everywhere. The whole natural world was aware of my presence, as though it had been expecting me. Everything was conscious and alive, even the rocks.

I had the odd sensation of the sky, the world, the universe becoming my body. It didn’t feel like a mystical revelation but like a fact, ordinary and extraordinary at once. I knew then that there was nothing to worry about, never had been anything to worry about. I found my way out of the woods just as the last rays of daylight faded. A rising half-moon lit my way, and I made it home just in time for dinner.

One final example -- The great British journalist, the curmudgeonly Malcolm Muggeridge, after a life of skepticism, became a Christian when he saw God’s unconditional love for the world in Mother Teresa’s love for the homeless and dying lived out on the streets of Calcutta. Muggeridge wrote later. This is what he once wrote about Nicodemus to whom Jesus said – “you must be born from above.”

‘It sounds crazy, as it did to Nicodemus, who asked how it was possible to be born again. Yet it happens: it has happened innumerable times. Suddenly caught up in the wonder of God’s love flooding the universe, [Nicodemus] was made aware of the stupendous creativity that animates all of life—every color brighter, every shape more shapely, every meaning clearer, every note more musical, above all, every human face, all human companionship, recognizably a family affair—all irradiated with the same new glory in the eyes of one newly born.” (Christ and the Media, p.74,75)

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that anyone might come to see and believe that the beauty in this world is no accident . . . so that they might, in time, open like a rose, and begin an everlasting exploration of all that is worth exploring. That is the promise of God and a worthy one for a brand new year.

Amen