

October 23, 2005
Isaiah 66:1-2, 12-13, Philippians 2:5-11
Dr. Richard L. Baker

"The View From Below"

The phrase is from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who was martyred in the last years of Hitler's Germany.

Bonhoeffer was born into one of the most prominent families in Europe, and grew up in a house that, judging from the pictures, anyway, was bigger than this sanctuary. But he spent the last two years of his life in a 9' x 12' prison cell. In one of his letters from prison, Bonhoeffer wrote:

We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below—from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.

The perspective of those who suffer. Jesus knew that view, too. As Paul tells us, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave; he humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.

You know it's a remarkable thing: if someone were to tell you—out of the blue—hat God was coming to earth, you might expect him to go straight to the rich and powerful. To their penthouse suites, to sit in their plush leather chairs, to put his Gucci loafers up on their mahogany desks, and say, "Nice, gig, I got you here, huh?"

Instead, he wraps a towel around his waist, picks up a basin, kneels, and washes the feet of peasants and fisherman.

The view from below.

Do you remember a movie a while back called "The Doctor," with William Hurt? Hurt played a pre-eminent surgeon, who would charge into the operating theater with his gloved hands held high, with nurses and assistants trailing after him, helping him into his gown and mask, holding X-rays up high for him to see—a whole team of highly trained, highly skilled professionals (and, oh yes, the patient, too) waiting for him. And, as his favorite rock and roll music came piped in over the sound system, he would swoop in from above with his hands, his instruments, his knowledge—all ready to work their magic.

He was on top of the world. Until he got cancer.

There he was, fully conscious, lying in a hospital bed, lined up in the hallway, waiting to be prepped for surgery, while the nurses, interns, and orderlies rushed over and around him—looking at x-rays, gossiping, joking, laughing, talking right over him—even talking about him—

as if he weren't even there. And, as the camera closed in on his face, you could see the disbelief, the shock, the anger: "Hey! You!! Up there! Yes, You! Look down! Down here!! There's a human being down here! A human being with a name! Yes me! Doesn't that count-don't I count- for anything?"

The view from below.

Some of you know that my wife Kim is a pastor at Thornwell Home and School for Children in South Carolina, what used to be called Thornwell Orphanage. But, nowadays, most of the children who live there are not biological orphans; they are, instead, what my wife calls "orphans of the heart."

One Sunday morning this past July, the children and the youth were scheduled to lead worship. Youth Sunday ... and lots of people teachers, townspeople, alumni-would be there. Kim worked hard with the kids; coaching them, reminding them again and again to look up and speak up. She worked especially hard with Ashley, who was going to preach the sermon that Sunday, to tell her story, really.

So there we were, on a sweltering South Carolina summer Sunday morning, the church was more crowded than usual, and it had all gone very well. The homemade music video, the singing and signing of the Lord's Prayer -all the typical stuff of Youth Sunday-it had all gone very well.

And then Ashley climbed into the pulpit.

Now, I'd like to tell you that all the children at Thornwell are cute and immediately lovable; but I can't. They've lived rough lives, and many of them reflect it in their dress, their speech, their whole demeanor and appearance. And Ashley, at age 16, was no exception.

So Ashley began:

I grew up in an abusive home. And my mom, my sister, and I were always running away from my dad. My mom and dad were always on drugs (so even my mom was a druggie and I hated watching her do that!)

Then, when I was in the fourth grade, my mom met a new boyfriend, and he was also abusive. He beat my mom and me all the time. He drank and did drugs and my mom got back on drugs. All this time, I blamed God. I hated him. Seeing my mom beaten and on drugs made me so mad at God that I stopped believing in him. I became an atheist.

Pretty soon even I started doing drugs. I snuck out at night and started doing crack and weed.

As I sat there, listening, in a little corner of my brain, I found myself doing some arithmetic: "She said she was in fourth grade, and I know she's 16 now and I know she's been at Thornwell at least three years. She must have been-what?-10, no more than 11,

smoking crack every night?" And, as this began to sink in, I tuned back in, and heard Ashley say,

My sister finally had enough so she left. So I stopped all the drugs and straightened up so I would be fit to help my mom! At the age of 11, I was getting my mom up and dressed for work, cleaning the house and cooking supper. I even stopped going to school.

Then DSS [that's Department of Social Services] came and took me away! I had to stay in five different homes. Now I really hated God even more!!

As I sat there, I think that's when it really hit me: no matter what I had been through, no matter what had happened to me, I had never really known the view from below, at least not like Ashley had.

But God has.

Because when Ashley turned the page, it was as if she was beginning again, in a better, brighter, major key. She said:

Then I came to Thornwell and things changed. I learned soooooo much. [By the way, "so" is spelled here with one 's' and 7 "o's" because, even after all of this, Ashley is still just 16 years old.]

I've learned that God knows my name ... that God CALLS my name. Even during the really bad times of my life, God has been calling me to be something different ... to be his child, to be his follower.

I've learned that I can still love my mom but not be responsible for taking care of her ...

And right then I could hear the sob rising in her voice and hear her starting to rush her words, trying to hold it back.

After all that work, after all that practice, it was as if the full force of her own words was hitting her for the first time. She made it through the next part of the line, "even though I sometimes wish I could take care of my mom."

But, the next part of the sentence, "and I still worry about her all the time,"--well, she just couldn't make it.

For a moment, all you could hear in that church was the sound of her sobbing and more than a few muffled sobs from the congregation.

And then a strange thing happened. It was very simple really: My wife just walked up into the pulpit, stood beside Ashley, and put an arm around her.

You may think I'm biased, but the beauty of it really had nothing to do with the fact that it was my wife. The scene was just beautiful: this hard-looking, fragile-looking 16-year old sobbing, and the minister of God, standing there beside her with her arm around her. Kim asked Ashley if she could read a few lines for her, and Ashley nodded yes. And then as she read, Kim started to tear up, and she laughed and said, "If I can't do this, who's going to come up next?" Well, that made Ashley laugh, and she said, "It's okay, I can do it now." So, as my wife stepped aside out of the pulpit, Ashley picked up again, clear and steady, in her own voice:

You may hear this and say, "Wow! What a sad story! But you know what? I don't want people to say my story is sad. Because my story isn't sad. It isn't sad because it isn't finished yet. My story is still being written and I know the end is going to be happy. I know it because I know now that I have God in my life and I know he will not leave me no matter how many times I leave him. There are things I want to do with my life. I want to go to school and become a social worker or day care worker so I can take care of children. I just have to trust that God's going to do something good with my past so I can help someone in the future.

As I sat there, all I could think was: "Where?" Where does a child like this--beaten, abused, abandoned and betrayed by the very parents who should have loved her, shunted from foster home to foster home, living in an institution, not a cent to her name--where does a child like that, this child, find such strength? The strength not only to survive, but to hope, and not only to hope, but to be assured of her own future happiness. The strength not only to love, but to forgive, and not only to love and forgive, but to love and forgive the very mother who was unable to love her. The strength to believe that God could use that past--her past--and do something good with it so she could reach out and love and help others. Where did she find this strength?

There. Him. Jesus Christ. The one who emptied himself, and came down, and took the view from below.

Now, I'm new here, but not that new. I know that that is the "Ascension Window," and there Jesus is being lifted up on high, ascending to the right hand of God the Father. But, he is also with us still, right here and now, in the person of the Holy Spirit. With us--right here and now--down below.

Where the ten year old child cries, "Where are you? You don't even exist. I hate you." There, in the pit of that despair, he says, "Ashley, Ashley, I am here. You're right; I am nothing. But you, you are everything. I love you. And I will see you through this."

Or go back to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's prison cell. Sometime during his first week, he wrote this on the back of a scrap of cardboard:

Separation from people, from work, from the past, from the future, from marriage, from God, impatience, longing, boredom, sick, profoundly alone, suicide, not because of consciousness of guilt, but because basically I am already dead.

And then, as if he were adding a column of numbers, Bonhoeffer drew a line underneath these words, and then wrote "Total." And then, following that, the three words that said everything: "Overcome in prayer."

There. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer knelt down in his prison cell, Jesus Christ came down to him, and said, "Dietrich, Dietrich, I am here. I am with you." There, in the darkness of that cell, the light of the world came to him: "I have known this death; I love you. I will carry you through it, and there will be joy, and yes, even laughter, on the other side."

I have to confess that I can't explain this. That God, the being of all beings, the holy of all holies, the king of all kings and lord of all lords, eternal, immortal, invincible, that God, God, Master and Ruler of the universe, that God, God, would empty himself, taking the form of a slave, being obedient to death, even death on a cross—for us, for Ashley, for Dietrich and for you and for me. Why? Why would God do this?

I can't explain it.

Oh, I can put some words around it, sure, but I can't explain it.

I can tell you that this is called "kenotic" theology, from the Greek word kenosis, which means emptying, the word Paul uses here in Philippians—which helps explain it some, I guess. Okay ... maybe a little. Okay ... maybe not at all.

Or, I can tell you that the overarching architectonic principle of John Calvin's theology is the so-called principle of accommodation, that God lowers himself to us, taking the view from below, accommodating himself to our weakened minds and fallen condition. Only Calvin is far too good a theologian to speak of "an overarching architectonic principle." No, he goes straight to Isaiah 66, and says as a mother rushes to comfort her child, so God. So, God to us.

Or I can go to the Old Testament and the burning bush: "Moses, Moses, I have observed the misery of my people in Egypt, and I have heard their cry. Indeed, I know their suffering and I have come down to deliver them, and to bring them up to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

Or to the New: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

I have words, but no answer. No answer to the question: Why? Why would God do this? Oh, I can try to give an answer—Because God is God and no mere mortal. Because God loves. Because God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and that is love. Because God loves as only God can love. Because God is love. Because God is God ... Because God is ... God ... is ...

Truth be told, I don't even have words.

So, here I am, your new Theologian in Residence, and I have just confessed my complete ignorance and my total inarticulateness on the only theological question that really matters. Perhaps this would be a good time to draw this sermon to a close.

So, let me do something you might have expected. I want to invite you to take part in some of the classes and educational opportunities here at Second.

But I'm going to do this--NOT because it's my job and I'd like to keep it for a while (although that's true).

And I'm going to do it--NOT because, if you come out, you'll learn something and enjoy some fellowship in the bargain (although I hope that will prove true).

Not even because we are Presbyterians, and Presbyterians have always been committed to loving the Lord God with heart, soul, and mind. That grabs me, I admit, but it's not why I'm going to invite you.

No, I'm going to invite you because God has promised. God has promised that, when we humble ourselves to the humble one, when we kneel down to the one who has knelt for us, when we seek to serve the one who came to serve, when we say with Augustine, "I believe, Lord, help me to understand," when we pray with the Psalmist, "Teach me your ways, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth." Or when we cry out, "I believe, Lord, help my unbelief." Or, even more when we can't find the words or the strength even to cry out, then, there, he has promised to be with us, to call us by name, to serve us, to lift us up on high to him, into his life and into his love so that we can live joyfully and reach out in love to wrap our arms around the world.

But Ashley, the 16-year-old, said it better:

"I want to have the love of God in my heart to branch out to new and different people. I want to be one of God's branches so I can bear fruit for him. My story isn't sad ... because it isn't finished and because I'm part of God's family tree and I'm bearing fruit for him!"

So that every knee should bend, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Amen.