

## Refreshing Our Faith #1: God

Tonight's topic is God, and, as you can imagine, I'm hard pressed to find enough meat in that topic to fill the hour. ☺ So let me fill some time with an orientation to a pattern I use in these talks. I believe that we first need to experience something in order to begin being able to grasp it. Richard Rohr quotes D. H. Lawrence as saying that "people can do anything they want with an idea, but a truly new experience changes everything. Before you can do anything with it, it does something with you!" Experiences have the ability to change our lives much more completely than thoughts and ideas ever will, because while you can argue with an idea, you can't argue with an experience. I mean just ask any parent of a teenager who have lamented the fact that their child won't heed their advice but needs to learn from their own experience. So, you're not going to hear me talk tonight about different conceptual understandings of God as all-knowing, all powerful, all good -- those are ideas but they're not our experiences of God. We certainly come to those understandings because of our experience of God, but let's focus in on the experience rather than the conclusions. People remember experiences. They're the only thing that will transform your life. They're the only thing you'll remember about these talks after they're given. Sometimes we have such powerful experiences that they become special moments, lasting in our memory, called above the din to a place of special elevation. And if we can find that others have had similar experiences, then we know that that experience was something that holds meaning at an even deeper level. Imagine if those experiences were shared across cultures and across time. Then those would truly be important experiences, not just for you or me, but for humankind as well. And those experiences would be worthy of reflection, discussion, documentation. That reflection, that discussion, that documentation, is what our faith is all about, from the pages of Scripture to the pages of Canon Law. All the beliefs of our faith come about because people have experiences that transcend culture and time. And those experiences, we call "being truly human."

So as I talk about God tonight, I hope to help each of us come to terms with our own experiences of God, lest this become simply a recitation of Church dogma. In fact, as I said, tonight I won't talk a whole heck of a lot about our exact beliefs about who God is and what we believe about Him. Don't worry, we'll get there in the course of these talks. Without understanding who God is, not just through our intellect, but through our souls -- our whole selves -- we can't appreciate the doctrines of the Church, our behaviors as a collection of people, our interaction with God, and our destiny at the end of our lives. Without the experience, the songs I play will remain words, not prayers. Now, tonight due to time constraints, I'll jump around from topic to topic to create a mosaic of who God is, and I'll need to leave it to you to make the big picture out of the colored tiles that I lay down.

Let me tell you a story about the God I know, in the hopes that it will connect with an experience of the God whom you know. I remember standing along a black iron sand beach in New Zealand, looking south toward a solitary, snow covered mountain, called Mount Taranga. Kind of like Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa, this mountain stands all by itself, with no other mountains in sight. The snow that covered the peak was offset by the lush, vibrant green of the New Zealand countryside. And that vibrant green was separated from the glistening blue of the Tasman Sea by the strip of black iron sand beach on which I was standing. I walked to a large piece of driftwood and stood atop it, either to separate myself from the natural flow from white snow to green grass to black sand to blue sea, or else to get a better view of it all, I don't know which. And amid the thundering crashing of the sea, I experienced something about God's interaction with this world and I began to sing the song "How Great Thou Art."

I would guess most of us have had experiences of God or at least of God's power in such nature settings. Something about experiences like this tells me what God is all about. His creation is energized and infused with goodness and beauty. It's at times like that that one looks about and sees nothing but the charm of this world and the incredible truth that it is all a gift from above. It is times like that that one realizes that there is a creative power about God.

And it's my belief that this experience of a divine and benevolent creator is the single common experience of human beings throughout all time. When we think about the natural assumption of peoples in times past that God exists, it's clear to me that the overwhelming mystery of creation and of life are the genesis of that belief. It's hard in today's world to get a sense of God's creation because we are surrounded by our human creations, but all it takes is a trip to the north woods with a million stars overhead infused with the gentle red, blue and green pulsing of the aurora borealis, or the beaches of Florida's gulf coast watching the magenta and purple hues of an undisturbed sunset, the experience of the natural world can overwhelm our senses and bring us in touch with the eternal.

And so we can imagine early humans in awe of their world and in homage to their Creator. Maybe their expression and understanding of their Creator was intertwined with what today we would call superstition and polytheism, the belief in many Gods, but it was our initial understanding as a human race of the self-revelation that God continues to provide us to this day. Let me describe the movement from this initial understanding of God to our present day understanding of God as Trinity.

Somewhere around the year 2000 BC, a man by the name of Abram was called by God and left the town of Ur in present day Iraq and settled in Cana along the Mediterranean, and renamed himself Abraham. God revealed himself to Abraham as one God, not one among many, and so began our modern day journey of faith. God was Abraham's friend, and often was experienced as epiphany, or divine apparition. Sometimes Abraham and God would walk along together and talk things through. God would give Abraham friendly advice, guide his wanderings, speak to him in dreams, and even tell him whom to marry. When Abraham and his wife, Sarah, had their first child in their late years, they named him Isaac, which means *laughter*, for the God of Abraham was a God of joy who was present in this world. He was also a god of goodness. The superstitious beliefs of the time often called for human sacrifice, and it was amidst this culture that Abraham took his first born son, Isaac, and led him to a special altar. There he laid Isaac on the altar top and unsheathed his knife, raising it to the sky in preparation for his human sacrifice to the demanding God he knew as a child. But the God who revealed himself to Abraham as an adult, was not the God of his childhood. He was a newly revealed God, who did not want human sacrifice, and so stopped Abraham from his sacrifice of flesh, instead showing him a way that required sacrifice of self. It was from this man, Abraham, and from his progeny, that God formed a special, sacred relationship with a Hebrew people.

800 years later, in 1200 BC, Abraham's descendent, Moses, led the people of God out of exile in Egypt in what was to become the first of a series of miracles that further identified the unique relationship of the Jews with their God. But unlike the friendly God of Abraham, the God of the Exodus was a terrifying God, raining horror upon the Egyptians in the form of plagues and killing off their firstborn sons. The God of the Exodus was a partisan God, taking sides in the battle between the oppressed Jews and their enemies, the Egyptians, splitting the sea to allow them to escape and closing it back up to kill their pursuers. Moses led his people through the desert to their homeland and along the way received from God a covenant, that they would be God's people, and he would be their God. Time after time the Jews broke the covenant, but their God held steadfast on his part of the deal, keeping them safe from danger: feeding them in the desert with quails and manna from the skies, giving them drink from the water that magically flowed out of a desert rock.

300 years later, in 900 BC, the prophet Elijah began to sense a new understanding of God. God was not in the wind or the fire or the earthquake. God was not in the forces of nature. Instead God was in a light breeze. God was in a realm apart. And the Jew's relationship with their God was no longer one of a friend, but of a distant king, watching over his people from a distance.

This movement from a close God to a distant God was not an experience particular to the Jews. In the period of time known as the Axial age, from 800 to 200 BC, cultures as far apart as India and Greece moved from experiencing God in the natural world, to seeking God indirectly through inner peace or rational and philosophical musings. And a shift began to take place throughout all of human culture. That shift was away from seeing God journeying into the world to be with us, and toward seeing human life as having a transcendent element that had to journey to God in order to be with Him.

This was true for the Jews as well, for in this age, they were taken into Exile by the Babylonians. God became more and more remote, less accessible and more mysterious. In the book of Job, which was written at this time, Job is ridiculed by his friends for believing in God – see, ridicule of the faithful isn't just a modern day problem. Job continues his belief, but instead of receiving favor from God, receives trial after trial. He begins to directly question God, with intelligent and rational questions, but they do not solve his dilemma. The experience of Job showed that intellect alone is not enough to understand God. Gone was the possibly over simplistic description of God in human terms and on human conditions, and more and more were seen descriptions of God that were rational, describing God as the Unmoved Mover or Uncreated Creator. The Book of Job tells the Jews that they were both gaining and losing something in seeing God through the mind rather than the heart.

In 333 BC, Alexander the Great set off on his conquest of the world, and the mix of rational Greek thought and wisdom further began to influence the Jewish world and their beliefs. Soon a picture of God was created that was so remote that the belief was that God was totally unknowable. God consisted of *ousia* or essence, which could not be known at all. The only way we could know about God was indirectly through his *dynamies* or actions.

Along this time, the sense of mystery surrounding God became so great that the mentioning of God's name was forbidden. Even writing the name of God was specially encoded as YHWH. The Jews struggled with this concept of God as distant, rational, and loosely coupled with the world.

This sense of distancing came to a crisis in 70 A.D. when the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. God, to a large extent, had become tethered to His creation only at a single point in this world, in a room inside the temple called the Holy of Holies. In that location, only one person could ever enter, the head priest. But with the destruction of the temple, the Jews lost their sense of place in this world. Over time this curse became a blessing, for when the temple was destroyed, God was no longer confined by the temple. Increasingly He became a God of relationship again, redefined as *shekina*, or one who pitched his tent with his people. God was accessible to the people again. He didn't confine himself to the back room of a temple, but dwelt with his people on earth. The God of the Jews and the new Christians, the God of Abraham, the God of community, was no longer a God apart, a God of the individual, a God of mystery, but he was a God of experience again. Accessible, knowable and available.

This movement of finding God in relationship was in keeping with the revelation of God the Father that Jesus shared before the destruction of the temple. Jesus told stories about God, whom he called *Abba* or "Daddy." He told stories of God in human terms, and reignited the sense of relationship with God the Father. God the Father created this world, for sure, but He also protected and cared for His creation, he provided insight and strength when they were needed. And most of all, He freely gave his love to all who would receive it.

Jesus' ministry is full of sayings and examples about this. Jesus taught us that God the creator, the judge, the victor, the king, the friend, the guide, the all benevolent, was not a god in the distance, not a god of thunder and ice. Instead, God the Father was like the best of all possible Fathers. And by revealing to us the *person* of the Father, Jesus taught us how to relate to that person, as intimately as a child relates to their daddy.

There's a story Jesus told of the daddy he knew so well and wanted us to know. It's a story you probably know all too well. It begins with a proper father and his two sons, whom he loved very much. When one of the sons reached adulthood, he asked his father for his inheritance. This could have been received like a cold slap in the face by the father. It could have been received as the son telling his father that for all extents and purposes, he was dead in the son's eyes. But instead, this seemingly gullible galoot hands his son his inheritance and wishes him well on his journeys. The son spends his money prodigally, loosely on the excesses of this world until it is all gone. The son comes to the end of his money just as tough times hit the area. Generosity dries up like a brook during a drought, and he finds himself feeding pigs. Hopefully you all know what pigs smell like. Not a pleasant job. And it was made even more demeaning because pork was a forbidden food for Jews, it was not kosher. So this conniving and cunning son rehearses a speech, knowing his father as a gullible galoot, will take him back and treat him well, if only as a servant now. "Father I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired hands." And with this tidy speech all wrapped up he heads home.

Unbeknownst to this cunning youngster, his father each day scans the horizon in all directions in hope that his son will one day return. And while the son is still a long way off, the father spots him, and throwing away all the decorum that a Jewish father is expected to maintain, he runs down the road to meet his startled son. "Father I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired hands," says the son. But the father will have none of it and his love flows as freely and as non-revengeful as ever. He loses even more of the fatherly Jewish decorum and throws his arms around his son, wrapping him in his love. Happy that this son "was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and is found." He kills the fatted calf, even in this troubled time, to celebrate.

The God Jesus showed us was a God who loves to the point of futility. And this image of God as Love has stayed with us ever since. You can only imagine how radical a shift this Abba/Daddy God was. And you can only imagine how radical a shift the belief that God was not a single person, but 3 was.

The development of the belief that God is more than God the Father was based not on theory but on experience. In fact, this belief ran like a train right over reason and theory. And it did so because the experience of Jesus was so overwhelming that reason had to stand aside to make way for the reality of experience that Jesus brought to us.

But how can we, as 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians come to know Jesus in a deep, experiential way that will run us over like an unstoppable train? Obviously, God provides us ample opportunities for that experience, but since I'm not God, I can only help by asking you to imagine with me 3 snippets of the experience of Peter, in the hopes that through his experiences, you can come close to your own experiences, and enliven again the urgency with which God is calling each of us.

Want you to imagine you're a man named Simon. Fisherman. Married. Jewish. Faithful. You've got obligations and responsibilities. A business to run. Bills to pay. Mouths to feed. A mortgage on the ship... Jesus says "Follow me." You drop your net and follow.

"What sorts of things about you would make you drop everything and follow him?"

"What sorts of things about Jesus would make you want to follow him?"

"What does this say about the sort of commitment Jesus requests of us?"

Jesus goes up a hill to pray

You head out on the boat to sleep.

At about 3 in the morning, the winds pick up and you find yourself tossed about on the waves. You look out over the water and see Jesus walking toward you, on the water

"it is a ghost"

"get a hold of yourselves it is I"

"Lord if it is you tell me to come across the water"

"Come"

You walk on water

you fall in

"Lord, Save me"

"How little faith you have. What made you falter?"

"What sorts of things do you think about when Jesus walks on water?"

"Why do you want to walk on the water?"

"What makes you think you can do it?"

"What makes you fail?"

"How do you feel when Jesus saves you?"

And one Passover night, he asks you to set up a special meal, and speaks strange and foreboding words.

"Take this and eat it. This is my body"

"Take this and drink, for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins"

That night he asks you to stay up and pray with him, but you are too tired and fearful to stay awake....

"You too were with Jesus the Galilean"

"I do not know what you are talking about"

"This man was with Jesus the Nazarene"

"I do not know the man"

"Certainly you are one of them. Even your accent gives you away"

"I do not even know the man!"

You deny him.

The next day he is tried and put to death. You are too afraid to even go to the cross where he is dying. You've heard what happened. How they whipped him and questioned him. They took this loving man you knew and made him out to be a criminal, an enemy of the state. They tied a crossbar over his neck and led him down the via dolorosa to the place called Calvary, where they nailed him to a cross to die, along with two criminals. The crowds and soldiers jeered him. In one sense, you're glad you stayed away from the unruly mob. But a man by the name of Joseph, from Arimathea, came and donated his tomb to be Jesus' burial place. Joseph, the name of the man who brought Jesus into the world and the name of the man who saw him out of it as well. At least he had the courage to speak up and state his belief in Jesus. Instead you hide, afraid that you are next. Your world is crashing in. The man you staked your future on is gone, killed.

For two days you remain this way, you who were supposedly the "rock" on which Jesus would found his church. You fear for your life. Your hope and your meaning are gone. You are truly empty. Then, some of Jesus' women friends come running to the room telling strange tales that Jesus is risen. He is not dead, he is alive. You can hardly believe it, but inspection of the tomb only shows his discarded garments and tales are beginning to multiply that he is alive again.

One night, while fishing out on the sea, you have a particularly unsuccessful go at it. From the shore you hear a man yelling something at you. You strain to hear. "Cast your net to the other side." You catch 153. He cooks a meal of fish for you on a quiet beach.

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord you know that I love you"

"Feed my lambs."

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord you know that I love you"

"Tend my sheep."

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

"Lord, you know everything. You know well that I love you."

"Feed my sheep"

Three times you rejected him, and now three times he lets you affirm him. You feel renewed again, somehow lighter, your burden is cast off and now you understand what the lepers and blind men felt, the woman caught in adultery, the woman at the well. They all felt this experience too. All along you thought you were different because you were the first to follow him, you were a “lifer” compared to these other sinners. You never strayed, never that is until the end. But you did stray. You did crash. And now their experience was your experience – God forgives. God lives. And God loves.

So I spent a lot of time going through the experience of Peter. Why? Why not just jump to the Church’s beliefs about Christ and forget the story telling already? Because, without the experience, the belief system makes no sense. Paul says “If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then our faith is in folly”. It’s in the experience that the belief finds a mooring, that the belief becomes tenable. It’s *experience* that the Catholic Church seeks to capture through our Sacraments, our interaction with the things of this world, charged with the Divine, that makes us different. We’ll get to that when we discuss Sacraments in a later talk. Yet, one of the things that evangelical Christians have right is that you’ve got to experience Jesus before you can really allow beliefs about him to change your behavior. And that’s what it’s all about, right? Changing behavior?

Let’s hold on to that for a moment, and return back to Peter and the disciples. You see, there they were, holed up in some upper room somewhere. Not reflecting on the fact that Jesus is God, but cowering in their fear. They relished the appearances, for they provided comfort, but they did not instill mission. It took two more events before the newly revealed God broke through to them and subsequently caused them to face the world.

Let me put it this way:

They should have known that something like this would happen. Every time they got something beautiful in life, God took it away. And it wasn’t just one of them, it was their entire nation. Just as they had come to settle down and live peacefully in their land, an alien tribe, called the Egyptians, came and stole them away into exile. And just when they had learned to live in humility under the rule of that other government, this guy named Moses came and carried them off into a desert. And just when they had learned to trust God to provide them with all things in the desert, they came into the Promised Land. But the Promised Land was filled with corrupt governments and continual war. And just when their lives were beginning to settle down in their homeland, they were carried off by another tribe, the Babylonians. And just when they were beginning to assimilate into their new land, they were freed and returned to their homeland yet again. And just when they were beginning to think that their homeland was finally theirs again, yet another alien nation took them over, the Greeks. And the story goes on and on. Their sacred history, the bible, was filled with it. Just as they were beginning to feel at ease, their world was shaken. Every time something beautiful happened, God took it away.

And then they met Jesus. Now these were the happiest days of their lives. They saw the world in a completely new light. And their God was more wonderful than ever.

But they should have known something would happen. After 3 of the most fulfilling years of their lives, he was taken away and killed before their eyes. There was no end to the loss. And God did it.

And later, as they huddled in a room afraid that they would be the next ones to be slaughtered, he came back. Now *these* were the happiest days of their lives. They saw the world in a completely new light. And their God was more wonderful than ever.

But they should have known something would happen. After 40 of the most joyous days of their lives, he was taken away again, ascending into heaven, far far away. There was no end to the loss. And God did it.

So they huddled in a room, depressed that every time there was something beautiful in their lives, God took it away. (Could they have been Irish?) But then they realized that every time God took something away, they were given something even more precious. How could they have been so blind?

And huddled in their room, God came to them in the most powerful way possible — God filled them with his Holy Spirit. No longer was he just God the Father who provided from afar. No longer was he just God the Son who was a friend in their journey. But now he was also God the Spirit who filled their very beings. How much closer could he come? And they finally caught on. They left the room, addressed the crowds outside and wore their faith on their sleeves — converting 1000's that very first day.

God doesn't just create holes in our lives, he creates holes so that we have the opportunity to let Him fill our lives more completely. Christianity is a religion of perspective. We can either concentrate on all the things that have been lost in our lives, or we can rejoice in all the possibilities that loss has opened up. It's not just idealism. It makes all the difference in the world. And that perspective is what God has been trying to show us throughout all of history. That perspective is what Jesus meant when he said "the Kingdom of God is upon you." That perspective is what allowed them to risk the biggest holes: their careers, their families, their status in society, and even their life on this earth.

Great, so maybe now we understand a little better the profound impact of Jesus and His Spirit on the disciples. Maybe we can understand how they went out and preached — so powerfully that thousands were converted their very first day. Maybe we can understand why they continued to devote their lives to a man who died — for His Spirit lives. Maybe we can imagine what would cause others to join the early Church, give up their former ways, cause divisions in their families, and even die in martyrdom at the pleasure of the Roman crowds at the Circus Maximus. But how does any of this address the central question of this talk: "What do we believe about God?"

My hope is that it says a lot. Here are the basics:

God created the world in his love, for all He does is love

So deep is his love that he kept and renewed his covenant again and again

So deep is his love that he sent his Son to walk among us, live as one of us, show us how to live, and how to die, and to redeem us from our sinfulness.

So deep is his love that he filled our emptiness with his Spirit, so that we no longer had to seek God "out there" but could find him everywhere and in every one.

But isn't this a different God than the God of Abraham and Moses that I began this talk with? No, it's the same God, but a fuller understanding: a single God, yes, yet a God composed of 3 persons, Father, Son and Spirit. We know what each one shows us, but how can they be one? And how did they come to be?

These questions troubled the Church for a long long time. Their experience taught them that it was true, yet their minds couldn't grasp it. For hundreds of years, the thinkers in the Church tried to find ways to make the Trinity go away, but in every attempt the experience of the Church needed to be discarded in order for the new theories to work – and the experience was the one thing that couldn't be discarded. So theologians thought and worked and talked and thought and worked. They finally came to the conclusion that the Trinity is a fundamental aspect of our faith, and that, as such, it is a complete mystery. However, the Western mind doesn't deal well with mystery, so Western thinkers continued to chip away at the mystery. While we can't explain the Trinity completely, we can come up with some images that help us to hold it in our mind. The approach that works best for me is buried in the creed. Remember the insight of the epistle writer, John: God is Love. Love is a dynamic that isn't healthy if engaged in by only one person. A person in isolation has only one focus of that love: themselves. To love yourself exclusively is an example of narcissistic love, not Godly love. No, if God is Love, then God must not only consist of one who loves, but also of an object of that Love. Thus, just as the Father exists, so, too, must the Father, by his very existence as "love", generate an object of that Love, His Son. So, while the Father was the first to exist, instantaneous with His existence comes the Son. Now, while the Father and Son both exist, the relationship between them must come to be as well, for they cannot love each other outside of relationship. Thus, the Holy Spirit spirates from both of them as soon as they exist in relation. Now, God the Father can love God the Son through God the Holy Spirit.

Let me give an example that might be closer to home for you. And that example is of a married couple. Usually we are taught that there are win/lose or win/win relationships. But in marriage, there are either win/lose/lose relationships or win/win/win relationships. See, when you're married, there's a third element around that didn't exist before. Since a marriage is for life, the married couple needs to ensure that the relationship is protected just as much as either individual is protected. A situation in which one person wins and the other loses, ultimately means the relationship between them loses, forming a win/lose/lose situation. However, if both people win, then the relationship wins too, forming a win/win/win situation. Just like a perfect marriage consists of 3 elements joined as one, so is the Trinity the image of the 3 elements of perfect love joined together as one.

Let me shift topics at this point by telling a really bad joke

A man walks into a crowded church and spies an open seat in one of the pews. He asks the person sitting in the pew "Excuse me, but is that seat saved?" And the person replies: "No, but I'm praying for it."

In the few minutes that remain, let me focus on one last aspect about God which we hear all the time and which can be confusing for today's Christian. And that's the question: are you saved? Specifically, let me try to answer the question: what do we mean when we say Jesus saves us?

Now there's been a whole lot of thought over the past 2000 years that's gone into how Jesus saves us. And that thought is quite profound. However, each generation needs to put these thoughts into their own words, building upon previous generations' insights, because sometimes the language of previous times doesn't translate well into contemporary times.

That reminds me of a joke I heard:

There once was a young girl who was sitting on her grandfather's lap. And as they were talking, the young girl looked carefully at her grandfather's rough skin, and thinning hair, and asked him:

"Grandpa, did God make you?"

"Yes, my dear, he did" said the grandfather.

And then the young girl looked at her smooth skin and thick long hair and asked:

“Grandpa, did God make me?”

“Yes, my dear, he did” said the grandfather.

Then the girl thought for a little bit and said:

”He sure seems to have gotten a lot better along the way, don’t you think, Grandpa?”

The point of the joke is that something is not better simply because it’s newer. But I do think that the fresher the perspective, the more fully it can speak to the particulars of today’s world.

The Church has talked about Jesus saving us through his sacrifice on the cross. His death on the cross made perfect sense to a mindset where religious sacrifice was central. But today’s generation asks “Why would an all loving God require such a gruesome sacrifice? Didn’t he stop Abraham from doing something similar? How does it help God to come down to earth and sacrifice himself to himself?”

And so if I’m typical of my generation, the question I ask is “Why do I need to be saved at all?” I know I’m far from perfect. In fact, I know I’m far from being as good a person as I can be. In religious words, I’m a sinner and I find myself sinning every day. But this isn’t a matter of who *we* are as sinners, this is a matter of who *God* is. If God is all loving, then regardless of what I do, why wouldn’t he save me? How can my experience of God’s unconditional love for me be reconciled with my needing to be saved?

Again, there are many ways of looking at this, but the one that's been helpful to me is to think of salvation not exclusively as my ability to gain eternal life in the future, but of how salvation helps me in the present to fully become the joyful person God created me to be – aligning my actions with God's dream of who I have the potential to become.

So let me give two brief examples of how we can look at the issue of Jesus as Savior to our 21<sup>st</sup> century mindset.

There's a picture in a church in Miens. It's a very strange picture, but I think it holds a marvelous truth about how Jesus saves. In it, God the Father is pictured as a fisherman. He holds a long pole and extending on the line from that pole is a very strange bait. The line doesn't extend into the water, but instead is held above the water, and doesn't end with a hook, but with Jesus on the cross. God the Father is fishing with Jesus on the cross. The water itself is murky, but in it you can see the leviathan, or evil, swimming around, interested in the bait above. It has a dilemma on its hands, though. You see, as long as evil can swim in the murky waters, it is hard to see. It kind of blends in and it's hard for us to differentiate between what is evil and what is normal. We can say "every one else is doing it, so it must be OK." However, if evil jumps out of the water to claim Jesus on the cross, it has to expose itself for what it is. It can no longer hide amidst the backdrop of murkiness but rather has to stand in contrast with the clearness of the air. And if evil is seen for what it is, it will lose its appeal.

If Jesus can force evil out into the open, contrasting life as usual where evil lurks with life as ideal where Jesus lives, then we will be able to recognize what evil does, and we'll want to dissociate ourselves from the evil in our midst.

Let me give an example of this in my own life. I used to love going to the movies, especially Arnold Schwarzenager movies. Now those movies were pretty violent. Each movie tried to out do the previous one in terms of how shocking it could be, how violent it could be, how explicit it could be. And for years I sucked it up, becoming inured to the shock of the previous movie and waiting for the next one to do something to shock me out of my malaise. Little by little my heart was becoming hardened by my participation in this pattern. But, when I had children, I stopped having time to go to the movies. And little by little, that hardened heart became softened by the bright, innocent, peaceful and loving eyes of my children. And now after over 7 years of not watching many movies, I am horrified at the level of violence, explicitness and caustic-ness contained in the typical movie. I can no longer suspend my disbelief as see what is on the silver screen as reality, because my children have helped me see what is truly reality. My heart, which had been submerged in the murky waters of Hollywood society, had been raised out and saved by the image of God in the children he gave me.

A second way in which Jesus saves is based on the experience of the Apostles. As Jesus died, they realized how capable they were of abandoning the person in the world who loved them more than anyone else. See, up on that cross, Jesus takes the worst that the world has to offer upon himself. He takes us at our very worst, not simply as individuals, but as a society. Up on that cross, Jesus lets the world heap its sinfulness upon him, lashing after lashing, jeer after jeer, nail strike after nail strike. He is the recipient of the very worst we have to offer. And as a result of our worst, he slowly and painfully dies, naked and alone, for all to see.

Later, they hide in a room into which comes the very person whom they abandoned. Imagine their initial horror! Could this be the ghost of the person they had so recently lost? Like the ghost they feared upon the waves? Was he seeking vengeance upon them and upon their weak spirits? Had they failed him one too many times?

In fact, the first thing Jesus does is show them the wounds in his hands, the pain that he endured on their behalf, calling them to remember how they allowed it to be done to him – their inaction was just as horrifying as the action of the crowds.

And so you can imagine their expectation of what is to come next – retribution for their inadequate behavior. But the words that come from Jesus' lips have nothing to do with retribution. Jesus says "Shalom", "Peace be with you." Jesus acknowledges their sinfulness, he does not ignore it. And he reiterates his constant message: "I love you." He seeks reconciliation not retribution.

He saves us by showing us that, as Paul says in the letter to the Romans, "None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing--nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable--absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us." No matter how egregious our behavior, we cannot ever exceed the embrace of God. Whether we make a covenant and break it over and over again, or take all the gifts we've been given and spend them prodigally, or have faith but falter when the seas get rough, or explicitly deny him 3 times when he needs us most, the response is always the same: we are loved. Salvation is the understanding, and more importantly the *acceptance*, deep in our hearts, that this is true, despite our disposition to want to believe the contrary.

Many of us have created myths about ourselves and have begun to believe them. We protect our vulnerability by thinking about how right we are, how smart we are, how strong we are, and most especially, how *good* we are, and we miss this opportunity completely. It's only when we accept our imperfection that we are finally able to accept how *responsible* we are for the way the world is, and to finally accept that both because of this and in spite of this, God is loving us, through it all. To accept this, and to break down because of this, is what *experiencing* God is all about.

Jesus saves us by first making us see our world and ourselves as they truly are: imperfect, sinful and stumbling; and second, showing us that we're loved even in our imperfection, our sinfulness and our stumbling. He saves us by continuously giving us another chance.

But once we understand that Jesus is our salvation, what do we do in response?

Ultimately it comes down to action. You see, to understand that Christ saves is a nice thing, but the response it calls for is to start following Jesus. The concept of Christ, the Trinity, and all the rest may not be clear, but you have to trust the following. If you're a golfer, you might be familiar with the Ashworth logo: "It's in the walking." If you're a philosopher, you might be familiar with Gabriel Marcel's "life plunge." Or if you're neither, you might be familiar with the Nike slogan: Just Do It!

Peter didn't understand at first. But he dropped everything immediately and followed, saying "You have the words of everlasting life."

The following is the key and leads to virtuous cycle. You must love him before you really know him. Eventually, in the loving, you'll begin to believe in what you follow. You will begin to have faith. The theologian Bernard Lonnergan says "Faith is knowledge born of religious love." Let me say that again: "Faith is knowledge born of religious love."

The bottom line to all approaches to how Jesus saves, is that Jesus makes a difference in our individual life and in our world, and as a result of this we have to act. Simply believing is not enough. Faith in Jesus calls for action, not simply contemplation. The challenge of Jesus for all of us is that we cannot just be bystanders in life, we have to respond to his saving love, enter into life and act! The challenge of the Trinity is that life in God requires living in relationship, and relationships call us out of ourselves.

Anyone truly successful in a sport has developed what is called muscle memory. Muscle memory is the ability to perform the same action over and over again in a consistent and optimal way. Muscle memory is achieved not through visualizing what success looks like, but in actually performing a simple action over and over again. In that repetition, that focus on the simple action, the body begins to act without thinking, and the best of the athlete comes out.

#### A Story of the Spirit

There's a story that I heard, which I think speaks to the essence of both God and this spiritual muscle memory. There was a young boy named Brian, who set off to school one day. His teacher was a rather structured and rigid woman. That day, Brian showed up to school one hour late. His teacher was upset and took him down to the principal's office and called his mother. "I've had it!" she said. "Brian was an hour late for school today!" Brian's mother couldn't understand. "He left on time today. What could have made him an hour late?" she wondered. All day, she worried about what had made Brian so late for school. When he got home, she asked him, "Brian, why were you late for school today? You left in plenty of time." "Well," he replied, "it must have been the rain." "The rain?" she said. "Yes, you see, the rain washed all the worms up onto the sidewalk and I knew the other kids would step all over them, so I had to get them all back into their holes. I guess it took so long that it made me late for school." "Brian," his mother said, "I *love* you!"