

Tell Me About Heavenly Things
John 3:1-17; Psalm 121
Lent 2

Psalm 121

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?

²My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

³He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

⁶The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

⁷The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

⁸The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

John 3:1-17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

⁷“Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it,

but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you (all) do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you (all) about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”

¹³“No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The Sermon

Whom do you trust the most in the world?

And how much do you trust God?

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader among the Jews.

That makes two confirmations that Nicodemus, a member of the elite religious establishment, knew the scriptures.

As a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, we can be sure that Nicodemus understood and contemplated the writings, prayed and lived the wisdom, and both absorbed the psalms into his own life and allowed himself to be absorbed into theirs.

He knew the stark terror of Psalm 121, of looking into the hills, where the unknown lurked and strange demigods held sway,

unseen, but *felt* to be looking down on the plains where helpless travelers lived their lives and slept uneasily, aware of their own vulnerability, praying each night before their heads hit the pillow that the threats around them would somehow be kept at bay.

“I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?”

And the trusting answer is:

“My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”

And having moved from first to third person, it now moves to second person:

“The LORD is *your* keeper...
The LORD will keep *you* from all evil; he will keep *your* life.
The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.”

Nicodemus knew the promise of scripture: that as God’s helpless people carried on their lives, always looking over their shoulders, glancing up into the threatening hills, sleeping uneasily in their vulnerability, they are being watched over by the one who made them and loves them reigns not only over them but over the whole cosmos.

We are led to believe that, at this point, Nicodemus had never met Jesus, but he was obviously intrigued.

Maybe the trust that the Pharisee Nicodemus had in God allowed him the space to look at this Jesus and wonder if maybe he could trust him, too.

In 1964, Granada Television in the United Kingdom aired a one-hour program called *Seven Up*. It was a look at 14 seven-year-old schoolchildren from different segments of society: boys and girls, wealthy and working-class, white and black, in public schools and private schools. They interviewed the children, described their circumstances in voiceover, and finally brought them all together for a play day at a playground and watched as they interacted.

Michael Apted was a 21-year-old assistant to the director working on that documentary, in fact he was the one charged with selecting the 14 kids from across the country.

Seven years later, Michael Apted had begun to make a name for himself as a filmmaker in his own right, and decided to catch up with those 14 kids who were now the age of 14, and he produced a sequel called *7 Plus Seven*.

From that point on, he committed himself to following those 14 kids, and carrying on with a series of films that would check in on them every seven years. So there have now been movies called *21 Up*, *28 Up*, *35 Up*, *42 Up*, *49 Up*, *56 Up*. Just last year, now in his late 70s, Michael Apted—who has also had a distinguished career directing mainstream movies, including *Coal Miner's Daughter*, a James Bond movie and many others—released the latest installment, *63 Up*.

Over the years, some of the original 14 have occasionally declined to continue in the project, and it's hard to blame them.

There are psychological as well as philosophical questions to be asked about people having their whole lives documented. If perception is reality, where do you stop being you, and start programming you life with the knowledge that it won't be long before the world is going to be looking at you under a microscope again?

As in all documentaries, the documentarians, no matter how objective they may try to be, inevitably add layers of interpretation of those people's lives to the thousands of viewers, myself included, who eagerly tune in every seven years to see what these fascinating people have been up to.

As a viewer, you can become very fond of these people, and even get, in a way, attached to certain ones. I was selfishly disappointed to learn that one of my favorites, who every seven years since 1971 has insisted, on film, that she wasn't going to take part in the next one, finally made good on her determination, and is not included in the most recent one.

Their lives are filled with the things that ordinary lives are filled with (as if there were any such thing as an ordinary life). We've seen them gain and lose jobs, marry, have children, divorce. One of them has gone through severe mental health issues; several have drastically changed their life courses.

Sadly, between 56 Up and 63 Up, for the first time, we lost one of the 14.

I don't know why we tend to long for round numbers, but I had always hoped that the series would carry on at least until 70 Up. Alas, it appears that 63 Up is likely to be the end of the series.

Some of the participants have been quite frank with the director—on camera—about their feeling that they have been portrayed inaccurately or unfairly.

One of the most vocal has been a participant named Jackie, and as they were filming interviews for 63 Up, an interesting exchange took place at Jackie's home. Surrounded by cameras, talking with Michael Apter and with numerous crew members in the room, Jackie, as they say in England, "had a go at" Michael; in other words, had a couple of fairly harsh things to say.

But, as apparently people had been noticing more and more, after he had begun to respond, he said a few more words and then seemed to lose his train of thought.

I'll pick up the story as told in the New York Times a few months ago:

Jackie laughed and rescued him. "I understand that," she said, "and that's why I'm saying. ... I wanted to say what I wanted to say but that would never affect our relationship. I know if I picked up the phone and said, 'Michael, I need help,' you would be there."

Jackie's voice began to catch, and her eyes shone. "You would say to me, 'Where, when and how?' and if it was humanly possible you would help me, I know that. I know you care about me, and I care about you, but that didn't stop me having to have a go at you. Well, we're a family, families fall out, families have arguments, but we are a family."

Jackie stopped, unsure if she had it in her to say out loud the thing that was plainly on the mind of every person in that room. Apter was frail and prone to falls; he regularly misplaced his personal items; he could often enough recall the past with great detail but sought frequent clarification of where he was supposed to go and why. Apter, she feared, would not be well enough to make a movie in seven years' time. The likelihood there would ever be a "70 Up" was vanishing.

[She said,] “And this is one of the reasons, and I’ll tell you this now, it’s one of the reasons there’ll never be another program for me.” Her voice broke. Apted himself was not in tears; everyone else in the room was either openly crying or seemed to be struggling for composure.

[She said,] “This is [it for] me, I’m done. Because I’m not having somebody else sitting in that chair and somebody else sitting behind the cameras. I wouldn’t be able to trust them the way I trust all of you.”ⁱ

Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark. Some say it was because as a Pharisee he wouldn’t have wanted to be seen talking with Jesus. Some say this is John’s way of highlighting a theological symbol, that Jesus is the light and that Nicodemus at this point hadn’t yet had the breakthrough of seeing the light.

But John offers no explanation: just the fact that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, came to Jesus by night, in the dark, with only moonlight and starlight and whatever candles, fireplaces or torches may have offered faint illumination along the way.

He seems to know that he can trust Jesus with this conversation.

In fact, I kind of get the idea that Nicodemus knows he can trust Jesus with his whole life. Or if he didn’t know that for sure coming into this discussion, he stays with it long enough to learn.

Jesus said: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus said, “How can these things be?”

And Jesus said, “You’re a teacher of Israel, and you don’t understand?

“Listen, if I’ve told you (all) about earthly things and you don’t believe, how in the world can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”

But Jesus, I need to hear those heavenly things specifically *because* I don’t understand these earthly things.

And by the way—in John’s gospel Jesus hasn’t yet said anything about earthly things that is remotely discernible.

He’s called some disciples, and they have followed, with no explanation whatsoever.

He’s turned water into wine at Cana after having just said it wasn’t yet his time.

He’s gone to the temple when it was almost passover, driven out the sheep and cattle, poured out the coins of the money changers, and overturned their tables and said: “Get this stuff out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

In Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed because they saw the signs that he was doing. But in John’s words, “Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and didn’t need anyone to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.”

And now he seems to be entrusting himself to the Pharisee who has come to meet with him by night, but one thing John has not even suggested is that Jesus has been clarifying earthly things all this time.

And yet, we keep asking.

Tell us what to do.

Tell us how to make sense of this bizarre political environment.

Tell us how to navigate racial justice, and LGBTQ justice, and abortion rights and restrictions, and war and ecological catastrophe and inhumane borders, and religious obfuscation on the left and hypocrisy on the right.

You say we don't believe you when you tell us about earthly things? Buddy, we'd hang on your every word if you'd just come out and say it, but what you're giving us we can't even begin to figure out!

I need you to tell me about heavenly things *because*—and I think I speak for all of us Pharisees on this—we're not having much luck figuring out our earthly things.

And Jesus said:

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

So the earthly realities we struggle with are inextricably intertwined with the divine reality. And the divine and earthly reality is:

God loves us. Immeasurably.

We are not condemned to hopelessness.

Because God wants to save the world from itself, and wants to save you and me from ourselves, and God always, always finds a way.

And the way into that knowledge and understanding, often if not always, starts with crawling to God in the dark, and trusting.

If you could go back and interview the versions of yourself at intervals—maybe every seven years, say—what do you think you would find?

What were you like at 7? And if you're older than 14, what would 14-year-old you have to say to the person you are now—about who they were, and what they wanted, and what they needed?

And you at 21?

And 28? And 35? And 42?

49? 56? 63? 70? 77? 84? 91?

What earthly things did you believe then? And did you know, at the time, that God loved the world so much that God gave God's only son for the person you were then, and for the person you are now?

William Martin wrote:

Do not ask your children
to strive for extraordinary lives.
Such striving may seem admirable,
but it is a way of foolishness.
Help them instead to find the wonder
and the marvel of an ordinary life.
Show them the joy of tasting
tomatoes, apples, and pears.
Show them how to cry
when pets and people die.
Show them the infinite pleasure

in the touch of a hand.
And make the ordinary come alive for them.
The extraordinary will take care of itself.ⁱⁱ

Whom do you most trust in the world?

And how much do you trust God with your extraordinary, ordinary life?

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ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/27/magazine/63-up-michael-apted.html?action=click&module=Editors%20Picks&pgtype=Homepage>

ⁱⁱ William Martin, "Make the Ordinary Come Alive," in *The Parent's Tao Te Ching: Ancient Advice for Modern Parent*