

Last Summer, my wife and I took a trip to Los Angeles. We were waiting to board the plane in Dallas when I saw someone holding a question brick from the Mario Brothers game (the art was 8-bit and everything). The man holding the brick did not have a thick moustache and a red newsboy cap. Instead he had a big mop of curly hair. I recognized him instantly.

It was Weird Al Yankovic. He of music parody fame. Right there. In the flesh. Getting on OUR PLANE with a MARIO QUESTION BOX.

I freaked out a little bit. I love Weird Al. Immediately, I wanted to get a picture with him.

The whole flight to LA, I kept imagining how I would approach him. Obviously I didn't want to be a nerdy fan boy. And of course I realized he'd be long gone by the time we got off the plane - Weird Al flies first class!

But then we got off the plane and *there he was*. Almost like he was waiting for me! He started walking for baggage claim right ahead of us. There I was, following Weird Al through LAX. Amanda kept prodding me: Go ask him for a picture! I was so nervous. But this was my big chance!

So I walked a little faster, got up next to him. Prepared my speech. "Ahem. Mr. Yankovic?" But then my voice froze in my throat. Because, out of the corner of my eye, I really *looked* at him for a moment. He was looking down at the carpet, walking with the hurried weariness of a person who's home from a long trip (haven't we all been there?).

I heard two guys passing us the other direction exclaim, "Whoa, that was Weird Al!" He didn't react or respond. I realized that, with such an iconic look, he must hear that *all the time*. And I thought about my own travel, when I'm almost home how the last thing I want is to be bothered.

So I dropped back to walk with Amanda and let Weird Al head out to get his car while we headed to baggage claim.

Amanda asked me why I didn't stop him, and I couldn't exactly put my finger on it in that moment, but I kept thinking about it for the next several days. I realized that I have this drive inside me for acclaim, for celebrity. I want to be known, to be loved, and associating myself with famous people was a way to get that.

In other words, I wasn't nearly as interested in meeting Weird Al as I was in the likes and comments the pictures would generate. I was interested in him for what he could get me, for how I could feel about myself. That's an ugly attitude.

I know a few of you in here can relate. You know exactly what I was thinking and feeling in those moments because, like me, you want acclaim and affirmation. But that's not everyone. That's not even most people.

So as we begin this morning, I want to ask what you're seeking. Maybe for you it's a sense of control - what makes you feel whole is being the captain of your own ship, where no one has power over you.

Or maybe it's a sense of security. You want to be sure that at the end of the day, you're okay. You have enough money, enough protection, enough people around you that you won't need for anything.

Acclaim. Power. Security. These are good things that become idols in our lives. When we become too focused on these, we miss God in our lives (and, like I nearly did with Weird Al, we miss the image of God in other people - they become means to satisfy our drives).

So this morning, I want to explore these drives, and how we miss them when we don't look to God.

Welcome

We're in the season of Lent, when the Church gets serious about preparing ourselves to the work God calls us to in the world. We prepare by fasting, praying and practicing generosity - these practices help us to identify sin in our lives so we can repent of it and turn to God for healing and restoration.

Our Lent series this year is called The Devil in the Details. We're reading stories of Jesus' journey toward the cross, stories in which - more often than not - the Devil shows up. Reading these texts helps us to find the everyday ways we are distracted from God's calling.

This week's passage doesn't exactly feature the Devil, but it does feature a snake (pretty close, right?). Turn with me to John 3.

This story follows on the heels of Jesus cleansing the Temple last week. If you were here, you remember that Jesus came to Jerusalem and offered a critique of the most important institution in Jewish life. He both confused and intrigued the Jewish leaders, as we see in this story. At the beginning of chapter 3, a Jewish leader named Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the middle of the night - in secret - because he wants to know more. The little John tells us about Nicodemus tells us he's at the very top of the social pyramid. He's wealthy, urban, male, and religiously educated. He's one of the most important and well-respected men in his country.

But in just a few moments, Jesus totally turns Nicodemus' picture of himself on its head. He insists that Nicodemus doesn't know *anything* about God (if he did, he'd realize that Jesus *is* God, not just an interesting teacher). Jesus goes on:

As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

Jesus is drawing on a couple of stories from the Old Testament Nicodemus would've known very well. First, a story from the book of Numbers, from Israel's time wandering in the wilderness. They were

bitten by venomous snakes, and the only way they could be healed was by looking up to a bronze snake Moses raised up on a pole. (Yes, it's as weird as it sounds, and we don't have time to get into that today.) Suffice to say, Nicodemus knew this story very well, and it only made matters stranger.

Because the other is a prophecy from the book of Daniel, when Daniel imagined God's promised Messiah as the "Son of Man". He's an angelic figure who appears on the clouds to bring judgment on God's enemies and salvation for God's people.

So Jesus is comparing himself to the Son of Man. But he's also the snake.

As people who already know Jesus' story, we understand he's alluding to his crucifixion - that's when he's going to be raised up. But even more than that, when Jesus is crucified, he'll become the lowest of the low (like a snake). Only the worst, most shameful kinds of criminals were crucified. If someone you knew was crucified, you'd probably never mention them in public again.

So Jesus is establishing a strange paradox: God's chosen champion will be "raised up" as the lowest of the low. God's moment of glory, the moment the whole world will know who God really is, is that moment when God becomes the snake.

No wonder Nicodemus couldn't see God when he was sitting right in front of him. Nicodemus was looking for the wrong kind of God. As a person of power and privilege, Nicodemus was looking for a God who looked like him. A God at the top, a God who wins, a God of power.

And Jesus was saying, No wonder you're confused! Until you can see the God who's raised up like a snake, you won't see God at all.

Fortunately, Jesus offers a solution for our spiritual blindness: look at the Son of Man, lifted up. Look at the snake on the pole. Look at Jesus, crucified. Why? Because when we see Jesus crucified we see who God really is. We see God's perfect love on display. He goes on:

For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son. And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants. -- John 3:14-21

When we stay with Jesus at the Cross, when we behold him crucified, we begin to know God more fully and deeply. Because the Cross is not a blemish on God's otherwise stellar resume. The Cross shows us who God really is.

The Cross is not a temporary set-back God is figuring out and working with his PR team to spin. The Cross shows us who God really is.

The Cross is not a failed attempt that God learned from so it won't happen again. The Cross shows us who God really is.

We never see God more clearly than when we see Jesus crucified.

Which is why Jesus proclaims that he didn't come into the world to judge the world. The Cross is not God's judgment on us. It's God's rescue.

The judgment comes, according to Jesus, in how we respond when we see God in all his crucified glory.

When the light of God's love shines down from the cross, there are plenty of people who want nothing to do with that kind of God.

We think, "God should be about respectability, about beauty. We should worship God because he's the best there is. I don't have any interest in a God who would allow himself to become cursed and crucified. What if God asked me to be unpopular or unloved?"

Or maybe we say, "I don't have any interest in a God I could beat up. Any God who would get himself crucified isn't worth following. What if God asked me to give up or surrender?"

Or maybe, "How could I trust a God who wound up on a Cross? Committing my life to him doesn't sound like a wise investment of my energies. What if God asked me to risk?"

If judgment is separation, then we judge ourselves when we see God, revealed fully to us in Jesus crucified, and we decide we're not interested in that sort of religion. We separate ourselves when we see Jesus crucified and decide we won't pick up our own crosses and follow him. We slink back into the darkness to pursue our idols.

What does it look like to remain fixed on the Cross of Jesus?

It can mean we're willing to risk. That rather than put our trust in the fortresses we build for ourselves, we trust God and choose to be vulnerable, generous and open.

It can mean we're willing to surrender. That we ask for help, trust other people and forgive them when they fail.

It can mean paying attention when you're on the train.

The week after we got back from LA, I was headed downtown on the DART (I love me some public transportation). I had my headphones in and was still several stops from getting off the train when an older man got on the train. He was dirty, only had a few teeth, and used a crutch. He sat down across from me and I made the mistake of making eye contact with him. He said something I couldn't hear (because of the headphones), so I pulled one out and asked him to repeat himself.

He told me he was on his way to a medical appointment and needed help navigating the stops on the train. It turned out the stop he needed was just before mine, so I helped him figure out where and when to get off.

I was about to put my earphone back in and resume the music when he asked me another question - this time something banal (probably about the weather or something).

With my hand halfway to my ear, I remembered walking next to Weird Al the week before, his body language begging me to ignore him. Now, here I was before this man, who was asking for just the opposite: some friendly conversation, a little help. He was asking me to notice him, to see him for what he was - a child of God who bore his creator's image.

I felt a wash of shame in that moment, because I recognized that I didn't want to talk to him - he wasn't important. Had he been Weird Al, I'd have snatched out my earphones and pretended to have been listening to one of his albums right away.

This man, asking for a simple human connection, revealed again to me the degree to which I was willing to discount him because he didn't do anything for me.

So in that moment, I looked to Jesus crucified, the God who died for me when I could do nothing for him. I stopped my music, took out my earphones, and gave my attention fully to this man for the next few minutes until his stop.

There's no amazing, climactic ending to this story. I never saw that guy again. I have no idea if our interaction was something he remembers today.

But I remember it. Because in his eyes, my need for affirmation and acclaim was laid bare. It was as though Jesus himself came to me, dirty, toothless and on a crutch. It was as though Jesus himself held out nail-scarred hands and asked, "Do you want a God who comes to you not as a celebrity, but as a nobody? Do you want a God who becomes nothing and invites you to follow?"

Maybe this is exactly why we don't want to slow down, friends. Because then we have to notice the God who insists we follow him.

We're afraid to risk, afraid to be vulnerable, yet this God invites us die.

We're afraid to give up control, yet this God insists we surrender.

We're afraid of being nobody, yet this God leads us to become nothing for the sake of others.

Communion + Examen

We follow God to the cross, to risk, to surrender, to become nobody. We find God with us, our security, our trustworthy Lord, the one who holds our identity.

Assignment + Blessing

It's in the world's interest to keep us busy, keep us chasing impossible goals. We miss God, miss who we truly are, miss our calling.

Solution: look to Jesus, raised up. This week: meditate on the Cross