

3.29.2023 Lent Midweek, Week 5

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Romans 6:3-11; Revelation 7:9-17

“Raised in Christ”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Tonight, we remember two saints commemorated this week on the church calendar: Hans Nielsen Hauge (March 29), and John Donne (March 31).

Hans Nielsen Hauge was a Norwegian lay-person who became an itinerant evangelist, and John Donne was a poet, priest and preacher in the Church of England. Both Hauge and Donne represent Christians who faced adversity and challenge and who responded by serving their risen Lord, Jesus Christ, with their entire lives.

Hans Nielsen Hauge was born in 1771 into a farming family at Rolvsøy in the county of Østfold Norway. Though Hauge had been baptized, confirmed and raised in the Lutheran church, on April 5, 1796, at the age of 25, while working in a field near his family farm, he underwent an experience of spiritual awakening that opened him to God’s living presence. Years later he wrote, “My soul felt something supernatural, divine and blessed...I especially felt a passionate and burning love for God and my neighbor. My mind was renewed and I grieved over all sins and felt a strong desire that people should share that same grace with me.” Though Hauge had experienced the call of Isaiah, chapter 6, “*Here am I. Send me,*” others were not so quick to believe in this young lay-messenger.

At that time, the Lutheran state-church of Norway had strict regulations known as the Conventicle Act of 1741 that prevented lay-people from preaching or from holding religious meetings without the presence of an ordained Church of Norway pastor. Another law, known as the Vagrancy Act, made it nearly impossible for people to travel freely from their registered home address.

However, for the next several years, Hauge traversed Norway, mostly by foot, holding revival meetings. Yet, because of these regulations and laws, as well as a deep suspicion of an uneducated lay preacher, Hauge was arrested at least fourteen times between 1796-1814, spending nearly ten years in prison. The extended time in prison broke his health.

In spite of this, Hauge wrote 17 books and was the most widely read author in Norway. Farmers and peasants trusted him and he helped to found factories, mills and foundries. Though merchants and state authorities resisted Hauge, he also became known as both a gifted organizer and an early

voice for economic opportunity and self-determination.

Hauge preached a warm pietistic faith, opposed to the cold and formal orthodoxy of the state church and its clergy. In a sermon on Acts, chapter 8, Hauge wrote,

The Word is the means by which God's Spirit prepares a place in the person's heart so that it can take up residence there. The Word cleans out evil and is like the sharp sword that pushes between marrow and bone and judges the thoughts of the heart and divides good from evil. Each and every person can experience this as soon as they believe and welcome the Word. Then evil becomes something they hate; they are saddened and grieve their impurity. Now they are baptized internally with the cleansing of their soul in the same way as water cleans externally...

Using imagery of Holy Baptism found in Luther's writings, Hauge wrote of the power of water and God's word which regenerates, forgives and cleanses us from the sin deep in the fabric of our very being – as he wrote, God's Word pushes deeply into the marrow and bone of our being.

The other person we commemorate this week, John Donne, was born into a prosperous Roman Catholic London family and educated at Oxford, Cambridge and the Inns of Court. Yet because it was also a time when Roman Catholicism was persecuted in England, Donne probably became an Anglican in the late 1590s. Donne traveled with Raleigh and Essex to Cadiz in 1596 and to the Azores in 1597. He became the secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, eventually entering Parliament twice. However, personal and economic hardship visited him pushing him to more deeply examine his inner spiritual life. Donne was finally ordained in 1615, and was appointed royal chaplain, eventually becoming a well-respected preacher and Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Donne distinguished himself not so much as a theologian but as a preacher and poet, helping people experience the closeness of God's word.

His poem, "A Hymn to God the Father," (included in this evening's bulletin) is a tour de force about God's grace for humanity's fears of death and judgment for its original sin as well as its repeated personal sins. Donne described how we are saved and given hope in the grace of Christ's death. Like Hauge two centuries later, Donne was intensely interested in how the human heart grows in faith by knowing God's word alive within it.

In his Divine Sonnet 14, Donne wrote,

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;

That I may rise, and stand; o’erthrow me, and bend  
Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new.

Donne’s image of the human heart in need of God’s grace to overthrow its captivity to sin and this world, would have also been understandable to Hauge. Both Donne and Hauge wrote of the deep sense of hope and trust that God’s word gives to humanity: the word is grace transforming the fear of death into faith that rises with and lives for Christ.

Both wrote in the spiritual language of the heart. Hauge wrote that the Word cleanses us from sin like a “sharp sword that pushes between marrow and bone,” separating between good and evil in the human heart. Donne, too, saw the human heart as the place of spiritual battle asking the triune God to “o’erthrow me, and...make me new.”

The twentieth century American-turned-British poet, T.S. Eliot, wrote of Donne, “He knew the anguish of the marrow, the ague of the skeleton,” knowledge that nothing could allay the fever that humanity feels deeply except God’s forgiveness.

Both Donne and Hauge experienced how the sorrow of personal struggles led them to trust in Christ’s resurrection. Both of them experienced Paul’s words, “*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*” Donne and Hauge model the Christian journey of trusting God’s mercy and grace in the midst of hardship, knowing that God uses suffering to reveal strength and new life in Christ. In the words of Revelation, both Donne and Hauge had been washed and made clean by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

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As we prepare for Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter, we, like Donne and Hauge, are also encouraged to believe in God’s grace deep down into our marrow and bones.

The hymn we just sang, “This is the Spirit’s Entry Now,” reads, “Let water be the sacred sign that we must die each day to rise again by his design as followers of his way.” The hymn we will sing in a moment, “You Servant of God,” reads, “You servants of God, your Master proclaim, and publish abroad his wonderful name.” Holy Baptism unites us with Christ in his death, raising us to new life as servants who live to proclaim God’s love for all throughout the world.

Like Donne and Hauge, God’s grace transforms us deeply in our hearts and bones, so that we might live completely and fully for Christ in this world. Amen.