

SCRIPTURE: John 3:1-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He 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.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus 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?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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 to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just 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 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. “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.

**A RE-IMAGINING based on John 3:1-17,
written by Cindy Brown, Marilyn Strauch, Rick Floyd:**

In our church’s recent study of Rachel Held Evans’ book, “Inspired,” the author re-told several Bible stories from the perspective of the main character of the story, to make us feel like we were there, inside that person’s skin. Our scripture reading today, from the Gospel of John, is a re-imagining of the story of Nicodemus coming to meet face to face with Jesus.

Here is his story:

I waited until night had fallen, so that I could speak privately with Jesus under cover of darkness. My name is Nicodemus. I am a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, a high ranking and respected leader of the Jewish community in Jerusalem. I am a teacher of the Holy Scriptures. I am a very learned man! I have studied and followed the Laws of the Lord all my life.

So I sought out Jesus in the middle of the night, because it would be dangerous for me to be seen with this young, charismatic preacher who was causing such a stir with his radical teachings. But I was drawn to him. He was different from the many other would-be prophets who had dotted the countryside over the years. Jesus seemed to truly be sent by God. My hopes, my people’s hopes over the centuries, our longing for God’s Messiah – could he possibly have finally come to us? I had to find out more from him.

So I came to him in the night. What a profound joy I felt just by being near him! I told him I knew he was sent by God. I had heard him speak, and seen the many signs and wonders he had performed. Who could forget the blind man who could now see, the paralyzed man who

could now walk, the dead girl who was now alive once more, the lepers who were healed, the poor soul beleaguered by demons who was now at peace and in his right mind, or even the water turned into wine at the wedding in Cana? And foremost on my mind was his much-needed cleansing of the Temple from its corrupt practices.

I came to Jesus to discuss these signs and wonders. But out of left field, Jesus said to me, “In order to be a part of God’s kingdom, you must be born from above.” What in the world did he mean by that? I replied, “How can someone possibly be born twice? How can a grown man re-enter his mother’s womb and be born again?”

But Jesus explained to me that he was speaking about a spiritual rebirth. That God’s Holy Spirit goes where it will, just like the wind rustling in the trees. That the Spirit can change us, renew us, give us a new mind, a new heart, a new understanding of what it means to be a human being, of how God meant us to live our lives in love and humble service. That’s what it means to be reborn and enter the Kingdom of God, he said.

Then Jesus got a little testy with me for my lack of understanding. He said to me, “How can you, a teacher of Israel, not understand this? I have told you and the people what I know about God’s ways, but you do not understand it, you don’t see it. You are too earthbound. You don’t understand how I must be lifted up and exalted, and returned to the loving arms of God.

Ah, Nicodemus, he said. God loves you so much that God sent me to you to show you how to live. To offer you the gift of God’s persistent, undeserved, life-giving love, to give you the fullness of eternal life, not just after death, but heaven breaking into earth right now! I did not come to judge you, but to lift you out of your earthbound darkness, to light your way on the path to God.”

Well... I left Jesus with my heart warmed and uplifted, but also in a cloud of confusion as I contemplated what he had told me. On my way home, I stumbled on rocks and roots in the dark, and wished for his light to illumine my physical as well as my spiritual path. And then, I suddenly felt transformed, renewed, reborn, as Jesus’ words swirled around my head like the wind in the trees. I began to run, light-hearted and fleet of foot, despite my age. And I knew I would never be the same. Has my long-awaited light come at last??

SERMON: “How Can This Be?” The Rev. Dr. Richard Floyd

Nicodemus’s nocturnal interview with Jesus can be viewed as a comedy, much like a scene from Seinfeld where the characters in the conversation are not on the same page, not talking about the same thing. Nicodemus is a learned rabbi, a scholar. He is looking for something from Jesus, more learning, more knowledge, more wisdom. But that is not what he gets!

Here is Jesus, newly arrived on the scene with spectacular signs and wonders, who literally knocked tables over in the temple to make his point about corruption in the Temple. This Jesus has been healing and preaching in a whole new way. And Nicodemus, being a life-long learner, a curious soul who longs for knowledge and understanding, thinks this young rabbi has something of God in him, and he is going to go find out what.

And so, he goes in the middle of the night to meet Jesus. Why in the middle of the night? Nicodemus is a person of privilege and authority in the Jewish world of Jerusalem. It might be politically risky to be seen with Jesus in broad daylight.

Whatever his reasons Nicodemus arrives in the middle of the night, and Jesus welcomes him in.

Nicodemus begins where he usually begins -- with what he knows. "Rabbi", he says, "We know that You are a teacher who has come from God. For no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." But if Nicodemus was looking for a straightforward answer, he has come to the wrong place. Jesus does not say-- you are right wise Nicodemus, I am of God, I am God's Son, and let me explain to you exactly how THAT works.

No... Jesus begins with a cryptic answer -- "Truly, truly I say to you, unless a man is born again from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus is baffled. Also, a little concerned. "How can an old man be born again?" How does THAT work??

And then Jesus explains further-- He is not speaking of literal rebirth, but of a new life of Spirit and Water. And the Spirit is no easy thing to pin down, adds Jesus: The Spirit is like the wind that blows where it wishes, and you can hear it, but you can't see it, and you don't know where it's come from or where it's going.

By this time in Jesus' talk, Nicodemus is completely lost -- he is a man who likes clarity in things: clear religious laws to follow, clear religious acts to observe, clear religious teachings to spread -- but this, this is all wind and water and mystery -- this is a mysterious God who cannot be defined or pinned down or understood. And this is when Nicodemus, the one who knows, the one with the answers, finds himself in the uncomfortable position of not knowing. All he can manage is: "How can this be?" Which is to say that the man who wants to know, who needs to know, who is used to being the guy who knows, has to say "I don't know." And it takes a lot for Nicodemus, the wise old rabbi, to admit that.

And when he does, when he is able to admit that he just doesn't know, that's when something in him opens up, allows him to stop trying to figure it all out for long enough, to listen, to soak in the words that Jesus is saying, to absorb something of the mystery and the wind and the Spirit -- and somehow it is there at the end of all his knowing, that Jesus reaches him.

We have all been in Nicodemus' shoes before. Sure, maybe not in the middle of the night talking to Jesus -- but if you have ever found yourself at a complete loss to understand -- if life has ever knocked you down or if the world has ever so dismayed you, if your ideas have ever failed so miserably, that you have come to your knees wondering "how can this be?" then you have been right there with Nicodemus, sitting with him there at the feet of Jesus, admitting that you just don't know, you just don't understand.

A friend and colleague of mine, Mary Luti, writes,
"Nicodemus lives in everyone who has ever come up against the limits of reason
in the death of a child,
in the powerlessness of addiction,
in the panic that no one will ever love us the way we want or deserve to be loved,
in the derailment of a dream or a career or a relationship,
in the failure of prayer,
in the blank dullness of depression,
in despair over the human condition,
in the world's greed and violence that spirals and builds with no end in sight,
in the futility of our efforts to know and love and improve ourselves,
in the futility of our attempts to control and change the world...
Nicodemus lives in all of us who have come to the end of our convictions and assumptions, our
(religious) identities, our doctrines, our pictures of God, our wisdom or skill or courage or
knowledge or self-confidence; hit that limit hard, head-on, and finally thrown up our hands in

defeat in the face of implacable mysteries; all of us who have ever hung our heads in humility and surrender..."

*(J. Mary Luti, "Now You Can Begin" on her blog at
<https://sicutlocutusest.com/2014/03/13/now-you-can-begin/>)*

Sometimes it is exactly there where we admit how profoundly we do not know, cannot know, do not understand, cannot understand, that we open ourselves to God. Because faith isn't about knowing. Jesus doesn't really care what Nicodemus knows, he doesn't want his learning or his comprehension, he has no need of that -- he wants Nicodemus' whole self. He wants his real self, not the self who is protected and puffed up with certainty from facts and figures and knowledge of doctrines and laws. He wants him stripped away to his core, to the real bare self, open and ready to receive, because he wants to give him something real: LOVE, and save his life with it.

Because, you see, THIS is where Jesus is going with all this, beyond all this cryptic spirit-water-wind speak, the new birth talk, the weird story of Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, beyond all the bafflement and confusion and wonder is life-saving, soul-transforming love, that is what Jesus is offering Nicodemus, and you and me. This God-love that will not let us go.

In Bible study on Wednesday someone said that many people think faith will make your life easier, but she had found it otherwise. And she has a point. This God-love that Jesus spoke about and embodied does not mean that we will never hurt or suffer, and does not promise that we will never fail, it does not pretend that we will ever understand or comprehend the ways of the world or the ways of God, but it does promise this -- that we will be loved -- the real us, who we are beneath our clothes, beneath the trappings of knowledge or pretension, behind our posturing and fake self-confidence, deep down to our core, we will be loved.

The good news is that beyond the mystery and the confusion of our baffling God, in spite of the many ways that it sometimes seems the world is playing a trick on us, is a God who first and last and always loves us, who is deeply and intimately interested in saving us right now, saving each and every one of us from whatever it is that keeps us from loving God fully and madly and deeply, that keeps us from being our true selves, whatever self-destructive behaviors or mental anguishes, whatever superficial attachments or deep wounds, whatever unholy distractions or legitimate excuses stand between us and God, God wants to level them, break down those walls so that we know the love that is waiting for us, undeserved, unasked for, but the love we all long for, the love we all need more than anything else if only we could let go of our theories and answers for long enough to admit that we hunger to be filled, and long to be loved fully.

It's not about "getting God." It's not about "knowing how God works." It's not about "understanding God's ways." It's about love. That God loves us, and will go to any lengths to reach us and heal us and save us, to breathe new life into us even when we think we have nothing left.

And finally, after his sermon flies right over Nicodemus' head, Jesus gets to this point: "For God so LOVED the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

And this is what Nicodemus came to hear really, though he did not know it, he came to hear of God's life-giving, life-saving love and this is what we come to hear too, isn't it? Isn't that why we come to church? Not for religious knowledge, but to hear the Good News of God's vast love for us in Jesus Christ. Harry Emerson Fosdick famously said, "No one ever comes to church to learn about the Jebusites!"

When we finally find ourselves vulnerable and open -- and there we do not try to speak or reason or prove our theories, we simply listen, we simply receive -- what God has always offered, what cannot be proven but what has been promised -- love. A love that never stops seeking us out. Even when we are baffled and weary and broken-hearted.

This love of our God is like the love of a mother, sometimes gentle, sometimes fierce, never failing. it brings us back to our feet when we cannot stand, it allows us to start over, to rise anew with each day. This love breathes new Spirit, new life into us, and it does not require that we know or understand, it requires nothing but ourselves -- open and vulnerable and ready to receive it, through Jesus Christ or Lord. Amen.