

SLD03.20.11 2nd Lent
Emory Presbyterian Church
John 3:1-15
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“A Salvation of Our Own Choosing?”

The night Nicodemus calls on Jesus, Jesus is in a mood. Not a bad mood so much as a “don’t mess with me” mood. A “get to the point” sort of mood. A “cut to the chase” sort of disposition.

It’s the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, you see, and maybe he’s still tripping from the Baptist’s high five, from the ease with which his first four disciples lined up, with which the water turned to wine at Cana. Maybe he still burns with residual outrage about the money changers. In any case, it’s clear he’s starting to get the hang of this Messiah thing, and people are beginning to notice.

A lot of people. Many are gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover, and word’s spreading about this young rabbi who speaks so boldly and behaves so rashly. Shop keepers murmur about Jesus losing it at the temple, and running around shouting, and flipping over tables, and whip-cording the animals out of there – chaos and coins rolling everywhere.

“And you know what he said when he was finished?” they asked. “Destroy this temple and I’ll raise it up in three days!”

It’d taken forty six years to get the temple where it is, and it’s *still* not finished! Destroy it and raise it up in three days? Is this man a prophet, a dreamer or a madman?

Nicodemus wants to find out. The guy *feels* legit, you know, in a spiritual gut-o-meter sort of way. But in case he's being fooled, Nicodemus comes in the night so no one will know. In case Jesus is a nut. There are plenty of them around.

Nicodemus is like a lot of religious folks around Jesus these days – smart, studied, questing, but a little slow on the uptake when it came to God's truth. *Plenty are professing Jesus as the messiah but few have caught on to the radical nature and magnitude of his role.*

Jesus knows what's inside people, what they *really* want and hope for, regardless of what they say they believe. And what people *really* want and hope for is a salvation of their own choosing, an outcome of their own expectation, a Savior who'll do what they want him to do.

How to get across to folks that you can't lasso the spirit of God? That the wind will blow where it chooses, and not always in a manner than pleases.

So here Nicodemus – Pharisee, rabbi, honest quester – appearing on Jesus' dark doorstep, sincerely wanting to sort things out.

"Rabbi, we know you come from God and all, but what we want to know is...."

Jesus jumps in. (We never do get to know what Nicodemus *wanted* to know.)

"Very truly, I tell you, Nicodemus, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above!"

Does it irk you when somebody finishes your sentence for you, a), and b) gets it wrong?

Who said anything about the kingdom of God?

But if he's anything, he's polite, is Nicodemus, and genuinely curious, so he goes with the flow of Jesus' riff.

"Excuse me?" he says. "Born from above?' Aren't we only born once? How can anyone be born *again*? What, do we enter our mother's womb again? Heh heh."

He's not stupid, Nicodemus; just trying to be friendly.

Jesus is unamused.

"You can't 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."

Maybe Nicodemus' jaw drops in confusion, because Jesus then says, "Don't look so surprised by what I'm saying, Nicodemus. You may think you've got it all down but I'm telling you, you're on the wrong track. It's not what you know. It's not what you do. It's what *happens* to you. You've got to be born from above! "The wind of God's Spirit blows where it chooses. You might hear the sound of it, you might feel its presence in your spiritual gut-o-meter, but for all your knowledge and traditions, you still don't know where it comes from or where it goes."

Water. Spirit. Wind. Being born from above.

"How can these things be?"

Jesus chides Nicodemus – I'm telling you, he's in a mood – "You're a rabbi and you don't understand these things?!"

Love that kind of comment. "What, you're a pastor and you can't explain God?"

At which point Jesus rubs it in. I'm telling you, he's *in* a mood, and it's not a pastoral one.

“We speak of what we *know*; we testify to what we have *seen*, but *you* people (as Stewart is fond of saying), *you* people don’t get it.”

“*You* people?” Don’t Jesus and Nicodemus hail from the same tradition? Same God, same prophets, same law, same writings? What is it that, for all their doing and all their believing, he and his fellow questers are not “getting?”

Or, closer to home, what, in all our *own* doing and believing, might you and I not be getting?

Some traditions, Christian and otherwise, believe that there are certain things believers must do or be in order to “achieve salvation,” or “enter God’s Kingdom,” or “get right with God.” That in order to be saved or go to heaven or otherwise “get right with God,” seekers must believe or behave in certain ways.

We Presbyterians aren’t supposed to believe that way. We do, but we’re not supposed to. What we Presbyterians of the Reformed tradition are *supposed* to believe is that salvation, grace, entering the kingdom, going to heaven, coming home to the heart of God, however you want to put it, is pure gift - free, unearned, unmerited, unattainable, even, on our own steam. That at-one-ment with God is a generous, extravagant, even, gift, offered to all humanity, to all creation, quite apart from anything we do or say or believe.

But it’s hard sometimes not to imagine that God likes us better when we believe or behave certain ways. I mean, we sure like *each other* better when we believe or behave certain ways!

It's hard, too, not to imagine sometimes that if we work it just right, we might be able to get God to cooperate with our plans, to support our preferences, to do what we want God to do.

But what Jesus seems to be trying to get across to Nicodemus is that all the faithful doing and believing in the tradition still won't do the trick. Nor all the knowledge, or professions of faith, nor even all the good works. When it comes to salvation, grace, entering the kingdom, coming home to the heart of God, however we want to put it, something always will be missing from anything we say or do or believe. Because entering God's Shalom is simply not a function of what we do or believe, but of what God chooses freely to give.

Whenever we think we've got it all down, we're on the wrong track. It's not what we know. It's not what we believe. It's not what we do. Being "born from above" is something that happens *to, not by, us*.

And many of us can testify to the truth that the manner in which God chooses to "rebirth" us, to grow and prune and repot us, is likewise often not of our own choosing.

Remarks Henri Nouwen in one of his Lenten devotions:¹

"Sometimes we grow resentful as we grow older, when our image of an ideal life evaporates and painful historical, personal, family, or financial realities break through to the surface."

Who, over the age of 30, is living the life you once imagined for yourself?

Last week we reflected on the gifts of the wilderness, noting that "God loves us and wants the best for us. But we heard as well that if we imagine that what is best for

¹ Henri Nouwen, *From Fear to Love, Lenten Reflections on the Parable of the Prodigal Son*, The Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust, Mark Neilsen, editor, 1989. p. 8.

us is what is most comfortable or acceptable, we are mistaken. What is best for us, we were reminded, may prove to be...something that risks, stretches, hurts, and pushes us beyond ourselves, beyond our preferred roles or scripts or boundaries or control.

Remember the painful process of Jesus' own exaltation - not on clouds of glory, but on a cross.

Could the pain of our own human and spiritual journeys, the vicissitudes of our own lives be places where God is molding us, forming us, *saving* us, if you will, into the unique person we are called to be?

Nouwen suggests that when we receive whatever happens in our lives "as an invitation to deepen our heart, strengthen our love, and broaden our hope," that's when we are being born from above. When we are "born from above," we see things differently, see our *lives* differently, less from the perspective of what we *wish* would happen than of how God is shaping, growing, pruning us, through the particularities of our own personalities, circumstances, and challenges.

When something important is taken away from us, when our hearts are broken, or our hopes dashed, or our dreams disappointed, even this can be an invitation to a deeper way of living. For when we are able through suffering to discover new life, the new life God intends for us, the new creation we are becoming in Christ, then, Nouwen suggests, we are being re-born from above.

In Latin, the word for listening in Latin is *audire*. If we listen with great attention, the words are *ob audire*, which is the Latin word for "obedience." An obedient life of discipleship requires listening with great attention with ears "born from above." If we are not listening, we are deaf. The Latin word for deaf is *surdus*, and if we're actually

deaf, we're *ab surdus*. Absurd. The "absurd" life is a life in which we're *not* listening with ears "born from above."²

What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus may sound like crazy talk, but who, in the story is really the more absurd?

One of the questions posed during Lent is how to go from an absurd (deaf) life to an obedient (listening) life. It's clear to me from today's story that if we think we've got it all down, we're on the wrong track. It's not what we know. It's not what we believe. It's not even what we do. It's what happens *to* us. In order to enter the Kingdom of God, we have to be "born from above."

And at the very least, in order to be born from above, we smart, studied, faithful folks, we honest questers, need somehow to let go of any salvation of our own choosing, any outcome of our own expectation, any Savior we imagine will do what we want him to do. Many of us profess that Jesus is the Christ but few have caught on to the radical nature and magnitude of his role. The Spirit of God will not be lassoed, that much is clear. Dare we trust even so a Savior whose salvation came through the cross?

To the glory of God. Amen.

² Ibid, p. 11.