

**Second Sunday in Lent - Year A**

March 16, 2014

Haven Evangelical Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Genesis 12; 1-4a; Romans 4: 1-5; John 3: 1-17

*Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

Nicodemus is a learned-man. As a Pharisee he would scrupulously observe the Jewish laws as interpreted by the scribes. He honored Hebrew tradition and history. When most looked at him they assumed he had his faith all together: he knew God; he had a good relationship with God; he felt comfortable in his faith and religious life. A similar view people might have of us gathered here. The average person thinks those of us who attend worship, go to Bible studies, teach Sunday School and are active at a church have God, the Bible and faith all figured out. If you're like me, I don't know whether to laugh or grimace at such a notion. I wonder if Nicodemus had similar feelings.

Nicodemus had heard some of what Jesus has preached and of the miraculous signs he has done. Something makes him want to know more and he comes to Jesus in the night. That's a significant detail for the gospel writer, John. "Night is a time of unknowing, a time of chaos, sometimes the setting for evil"<sup>1</sup> — like the night Jesus was betrayed. Nicodemus longs to understand and he seeks Jesus out in the night. Did he come in the darkness because he felt like he was alone in his struggle, that his religious Pharisee brothers were somehow more on track than he was? Was Nicodemus afraid or ashamed to seek Jesus out in the daylight? Was he afraid to admit he didn't have it all figured out? Did he worry what his contemporaries might think of him speaking to this nontraditional and perhaps dangerous rabbi?<sup>2</sup> In any case, he's not going to blow his good, religious-guy cover for now. Still, Nicodemus is seeking something about God and God's ways from Jesus — something he doesn't think he knows or has. Nicodemus goes to Jesus in the night for himself but also for us — Nicodemus is there for all of us who crave to know more about God, who crave a greater closeness to our Lord than we currently sense or who perhaps worry their faith is inadequate..

With all his good education, intentions and earnest seeking, Nicodemus seems to keep misunderstanding Jesus. Much of it seems to come from misinterpreting words that had multiple meanings in Greek. It's like the story I heard about a certain church, that during Lent they would conduct very simple, somber worship services, and therefore they didn't use their great big pipe organ during that season. So one Sunday a visitor to the church asked why the organ wasn't being played. And a church member said: "It's Lent." The visitor got a puzzled look and said: "Who did they lend it to?" Nicodemus hears the words that Jesus is speaking, but he misses the point. Here again, we might feel a bond with Nicodemus. Even without translating Greek, who *doesn't* sometimes feel like they aren't quite getting Jesus meaning?

"No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." "But in the original Greek, the same word that means "from above" also means "again." And so when Jesus said: "You must be born from above" what Nicodemus was hearing was "You must be born again" — which is where the expression "born again Christian" comes from. "But Jesus does not literally mean to be born a second time. Nor does he seem to be talking about a singular or specific salvation moment, "Jesus is pointing to the gift of the Spirit as the gift from above that comes from outside ourselves, comes freely from God.

Jesus tries again, "What is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." Jesus isn't denigrating flesh or our bodies. Jesus is reminding us that we can not "learn everything through our fleshly, human selves. Our senses can teach us the difference between hot and cold. We can learn to connect words and ideas to speak or read. We can learn to add and subtract and work with numbers and equations. But we can't learn God the same way we learn geometry. Nicodemus wants to learn God, to know God—that's why it seems he came to Jesus by night. 'Teacher, show me, tell me, teach me how to know God.'<sup>3</sup> Nicodemus wants a formula, a method, step by step directions to knowing God and growing faith. And how so many of us wish for the same.

Instead Jesus says, "Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The Spirit blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." But again, double meanings. The original Greek word that means "Spirit" also means "wind." And so when Jesus starts to talk about the Spirit of God, Nicodemus seems to be scratching his head, wondering why Jesus is talking about the weather, why he's talking about the wind.<sup>4</sup> But Jesus isn't talking about the wind. Jesus is talking about God's own self moving and coming to us in Jesus himself and in other ways we may not always notice or comprehend. We want our understanding and closeness to God to be something WE can achieve and measure by a certain program or technique. But Jesus is telling us it is God who comes to US — continually and eternally in love that is unconditional and complete. That's God's decision, God's very nature. WE may wonder if we have a relationship with God but God doesn't wonder. God knows you two have a relationship because our Lord created and sustains it. Yes, we can miss it. Yes, we can run from it. Yes, we can doubt it or reject it. But we can't stop it and, thank God, we can't blow that relationship because "we can't change the fact that God loves us, and the whole world more than we can imagine."<sup>5</sup>

Nicodemus coming to visit Jesus in the dark of the night strikes a chord. We often think we're alone in our doubts and questions. We look around at worship or a church event and think everyone else has their faith in perfect order, perfectly understanding God and feeling God's presence every waking moment. Let me just free you of that illusion — it's not true. There indeed may be some here who have had an experience of the Holy Spirit's presence — a feeling of being comforted in a time of despair; a voice that said "You are not alone. I am with you;" a surge of strength during an impossibly trying time. "But you may *never* have had an experience of the Spirit's presence and would feel like a fraud if you said, "I've been born again." But remember, my friends, Jesus didn't talk about the coming of the Spirit or our relationship with God as a specific time or a particular

experience. The Spirit blows where it will; you can't pin the Spirit down or set it within a certain formula." But that doesn't mean you have no faith, no connection to God. You may not have seen the wind but you can see where it has blown. Wherever you have noticed the light of love, compassion, peace, hope, generosity winning over the darkness of their opposite, you *have* witnessed the Spirit's movement, you may have been the very instrument the Spirit used to bear those fruits.

"Dr. Joseph Sittler was a Lutheran pastor and scholar who taught theology for many years at the University of Chicago. He longed for an experience of the Spirit that eluded him all his life. In a sermon he said, 'It is only honest to say that I have never fully known the warm power of the faith for whose declaration I am an ordained minister.' He couldn't point to any particular experience of the Spirit in his life, yet he continued to believe. 'My duty,' he said, 'is not to reduce God's message to the size of what I have or have not. It is proper sometimes to declare what one does not know in obedience to the bigness of God's story which transcends personal apprehension...' For Pastor Sittler the Spirit was present in God's story told and retold, in the wonders of creation, in the words of hymns, in the broken bread, [in the fellowship and love of a church community.] If you can't point to a particular experience of the Spirit, know that you are in good company."<sup>6</sup>

Faith is not knowing it all. Faith is more than a momentary feeling. "Belief in God can't be reduced to a single decision or experience." Our faith is evident in our reflexive and regular turning toward God,"<sup>7</sup> by showing up here, serving others, blurting out prayers you're not sure are heard, helping children to learn about Jesus — because those are the ways you acknowledge the existence of God who holds on to us even when you may not feel it. A student once came to Tony Campola ready for a fight. "I don't think I believe in God any more and you can't make me." After checking his own desire to argue, Campola said, "Fine. But God still believes in you." Don't put your faith on an imaginary scale or compare it to others. What we try to practice each Lent is simply this — to turn toward

Jesus, like our friend Nicodemus, and try to remember to be receptive to the mysterious movement of the Spirit in the world and our lives. “The wind blows where it will. You cannot pin it down or explain its coming. But Jesus also said, “I will not leave you orphaned.” Rest in that promise. And may the spirit catch us off guard and surprise us into believing what we cannot see ”<sup>8</sup> — the love and care of God that is ours.

Linda M Alessandri 3/15/14

## ENDNOTES

1. Rev. Dr. Barbara Lundblad, “Trusting the Wind” [www.Day1.org](http://www.Day1.org) February 24, 2002
2. Questions adapted from a portion of “We Have Arrived” by Rev. Bradley Schmeling , [www.Day1.org](http://www.Day1.org) Feb. 20, 2005
3. Rev. Dr. Barbara Lundblad, “Trusting the Wind” [www.Day1.org](http://www.Day1.org) February 24, 2002
4. Three previous paragraphs adapted from Edward Bowen’s sermon “On the Road Again” posted on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)
5. Adapted from David Lose, “Like It or Not!” posted March 13 on [worshipingpreacher.org](http://worshipingpreacher.org)
6. Rev. Dr. Barbara Lundblad, “Trusting the Wind” [www.Day1.org](http://www.Day1.org) February 24, 2002
7. adapted from Dale Rosenberger’s review of a sermon by Robert Brow “Assurance” April 2, 2000 as reported in [GoodPreacher.com](http://GoodPreacher.com)
8. Lundblad