

John 3 Lent 2

I went to see a neighbor in her new house this week, and she graciously offered me the tour. On the wall was a seascape (do we say “lakescape” here? I haven’t figured that out yet); anyway there was this giant photograph of a waterscape that captivated me. The focus was crisp; the colors were rendered perfectly; the setting sun seemed to have a real light of its own. It made me want to go outside and take a fresh look at the rocks and ice and open water and better notice their colors and sharpness. I puzzled for a while over the source of that light—was it a trick of paint or filter? I could see the light but not where it was coming from. And it was about this time that I realized that the giant photograph was actually a giant television. Oh well.

It still reminded me that a good piece of art, a painting or a poem, has the ability to make us see anew, to see beyond the surface to a light or a truth that was there all along. And that is the work that Jesus is doing in his patient conversation with Nicodemus, creating a poem to express a truth that language will not otherwise reach.

Let’s back up a bit. Last time I preached on this text, I pointed out that Jesus is making allusions to Hebrew scripture in order to show that God’s salvation—the gift of Jesus—isn’t just meant for the believers and the saints, the ones who are coloring inside the lines, but for everybody, every single one, without exception. He draws on a shared understanding of scripture and uses logic to persuade Nicodemus, who, after all, is an influential leader in the Jewish community and would expect a highly literate argument.

But logic is only one tool, and not always the most effective one, for changing hearts and minds. So Jesus also draws on imagination and metaphor to meet Nicodemus’s curiosity. I hope we can bring a beginner’s mind to this text, the way I believe Nicodemus does. I suggest we read Jesus’ teachings here as a kind of poem.

A lot of interpretations of this story want to see it as a cage match between the two men, hyping up the fact that the convo takes place at night, that Nicodemus sometimes seems incredulous when Jesus speaks. But listen as he opens with this statement of good faith: “Rabbi, 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 that person.” You are from God. That doesn’t really sound like someone who has come to cause trouble, does it? We don’t know why he had to visit Jesus at night—*maybe* he had bad intentions, but doesn’t it seem more likely that he was fearful of his peers, or that both he and Jesus had a busy workday and hoped to talk casually over a beer?

At any rate, night time is also when we’re most open to dream logic, to things that don’t necessarily make literal sense but come together to paint something just as powerful. Nicodemus is no different from us or any of the disciples when it comes to understanding mysteries like the kingdom of God and Holy Spirit. We grasp at them fruitlessly with our conscious minds, but if we try to apprehend them with our imagination, we may catch a glimpse of light beneath the surface.

What does Jesus mean when he says “without being born from above”? Or being born of water and Spirit?

I have at times an overly literal mind, so I can understand Nicodemus’s hesitation, his bewilderment. What do you mean about being born? I was already born once! I think it means being ready to leave behind everything we thought we knew, the warmth but also the darkness of the known world. Jesus superimposes the labor of birth over the labor of the spirit, the birthing pangs of *awakening*, which, no matter how old we are or how smart we think we are, is not in our power to effect.

We have to “go from our country and our kindred and our parents’ house” in the trust that God blesses us through the journey. And a big part of that, for us and for Nicodemus, is giving up our ideas about who deserves to be saved. “For God loved the world in this way, that he gave his Son to the world.” The whole world—the cosmos, in Greek.

As familiar as John 3:16 is, I think most people want to read its promise as exclusive: “that whoever believes may not perish” does not say “and everyone else will.” Indeed every scriptural citation in Jesus’ nighttime chat points to the idea that God’s salvation is meant for the very ones who are grouching and griping, selfish and ungrateful, wandering around in a wilderness of our own making. That really is the most important takeaway from this text. I don’t have to like it, but I do have to admit that I’m often in that category too. Eternal life is not the prize for acting right but the

universal and graceful gift of God. It's meant for people who believe and those who don't believe. It's meant for you and for me and for everybody else: "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."

Because the Spirit is not limited or bound by our ideas about it. "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." The wind can come shaking the foundations of the house as it did Friday night; we can know it's a phenomenon of high pressure systems interacting with low pressure systems, but it is still a power that confounds us. For those who want to believe that there are clear lines about who is in and who is out, the Spirit seems questionable. Nicodemus comes in the night as one of the gatekeepers, who pretend to know.

But Jesus, the Source of all Light reminds him: "You don't know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." God the Holy Spirit is disruptive and chaotic. But the effects are clear. Lest we think Nicodemus is unmoved by Jesus' testimony,¹ he goes on to defend him when other Pharisees would have him arrested. And he takes loving care of Jesus' body after his execution.

So, yeah, we too get turned around by the working of the Spirit. It doesn't always show up in the way we want or expect. It can lead us to places we're not sure we want to go. We might find ourselves doing radical acts of kindness. We might find the courage to stand up to tyranny. We might find ourselves leaving behind things we thought we knew.

For "God gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist." May we see through to the light and truth that lies beneath the surface of things. Amen.

¹ Remarkably, he is one of the few non-disciples in the book of John to show up in three different places in the text.