



SUNDAY SERMON

Stepping Out, Led by the Spirit

The Gospel according to John, chapter 3, verses 1 to 17.

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."

Do you suppose that Nicodemus had any idea what he would see or hear when he came out into the darkness to find Jesus? It is no accident that he came, no casual stroll; he sought him out. He planned this. He really had no choice. But could he know where this encounter would lead?

I suggest to you that in this passage we see a person on the brink of a major transition in his life. I suggest to you also that the threshold for transition in our own lives is always very close at hand. And finally, I suggest to you that transition—letting go of the known and moving into the unknown—opens for us the possibility for the incoming of the Holy Spirit.

I find intriguing the detail that this meeting took place when it was dark: "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night ..." I know; if he was a religious leader then this was a risky undertaking; it could mar his fine reputation. So that is why he sought Jesus at night. But things are different when it is dark. It is different to go out and meet someone at night. Something unexpected, unseen, sometimes happens. Shadows are different at night. Things which were visible become invisible. And that which was invisible is suddenly startlingly clear.

Now John—who is reporting this story—does not understand salvation as something way out beyond—an event or state of being that is removed in time and space. Salvation, eternal life, is just here; now, and in all times and places. Salvation is ever within reach. Yet, because of the shadows, and the light and dark, and the busy blindness of our lives, it is difficult to see.

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DATE

The Second Sunday in Lent
Sun., Mar. 12, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

READINGS

Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

What prompts one of us to undertake a major change? Something within, something without. Sometimes premeditated, sometimes accidental. Something has triggered Nicodemus to come out and search. He mentions signs that Jesus had done, signs that suggest to him a “teacher come from God.” Something he heard or saw gave him pause. Who knows, he may have been quite content, minding his own affairs, when this rabbi Jesus happened through town. He probably resisted his initial desire to meet with such a troublemaker. Yet there was something too alluring, so mysterious, that drew him out to seek ... he knew not what.

This is the pull—the irresistible attraction—of mystery, of the holy—the yearning both of discontent and of desire, the “high hope of adventure.” The search, the bewilderment, the proximity; Nicodemus; a man with questions, in the presence of God. Nicodemus’s story is my story, and yours. We are—now—in the light of day, when the presence of God may be at a safe remove, yet what have we come out to find? What has moved you or is moving you, drawing you forth along this way?

Jesus speaks of being born anew. Where and to whom were you born? Our home and lineage define us and in many ways prescribe our path. The Spirit is of a different lineage.

Being born anew, born from above, born again ... Despite the fact that this terminology has been appropriated and used as a litmus test of individual salvation, the whole point is that we are no longer defined by our lineage, our hometown, our career or vocation. Being born in the Spirit awakens us to an awareness that we are first and last beloved children of God, and that in this, we are all kindred, one flesh, one people, one lineage. It means letting go the narrow confines of our individual identity and awakening to our cosmic citizenry.

The wind blows where it chooses. Nothing limits the Holy Spirit to one time events. We need not be born again just once; we live with the prospect—even promise—of being born again and again, and yet again into ever deeper awareness of sacred citizenry. This is a gift of wonder and hopefulness for our lives.

While the journey of faith is unique for each person, those who have gone before have observed some common landmarks, some recognizable patterns to the journey.

One such pattern is the recognition that the spiritual path is not a linear progression with beginning, middle, and end. Rather, the way is circular. We come back around to places where we have been before. We do not go through a season of doubt just once, or a season of seeking and exploration, nor do we go through seasons of great attentiveness and faithfulness just once. Rather, we come into these places, are there for a time, move on, and may find ourselves returning years or even decades later.

For those who journey in faith, there is recognizable truth in the words from T.S. Eliot’s poem “Little Gidding”:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

I can see this circuitous pattern in my own life, with times when I have felt too confined, when things have seemed too predictable and orderly, that I’m just going through the paces, punching the clock. Giving rise to a need to bust out, leave the familiar, seek the unknown. Followed in due season, by a deep sense that it is time to return home, time to put things in order.

This is consistent with another hallmark: we are drawn quite paradoxically in two directions: for there are times when it feels important for us to know. We want to know for sure. We want to know that God is, that God loves us; we want to know what is the right so that we may do the right; we want to know the path so we may follow it. Yet, there are also times when we are drawn toward the unknown and the unknowable; for it is the mystery of God, the mystery of love, and the mystery of faith which is full of richness, great promise, and deep allure. We want to give ourselves wholly and fully, to be subsumed in the holiness of life.

Many years ago, when I was in transition from one chapter to the next, a friend mentioned that she had a gift for reading Tarot cards. I was looking everywhere and anywhere for insight, so I had my fortune read. I don’t remember most of it, but I remember that by some calculation using my birthdate, two cards in the deck were assigned as “my” cards. These were the emperor and the fool. As you might imagine, the emperor sits resplendent and wise in power on a throne. The fool, on the other hand, is depicted as a young lad, wandering, with eyes on the sky and stars above, not noticing that he is about to step off the edge of a precipice that leads ... who knows where.

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Major transitions, new configurations in our relationships, quests of spiritual exploring; all evoke this sense of being both emperor and fool. We have an inkling of what we are doing but cannot anticipate all the ripples. The important things work that way: relationships, faith, anger, love. In these I might do as Nicodemus did, sneaking out in the dark of night to ask questions of one who seems to know. To seek out and respond to the mystery which beckons from beyond, from among, or from within.

We may not understand what we hear, what we find: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb?" Nicodemus' encounter does not conclude with evident clarity; he is left wondering, "How can this be?" Yet Nicodemus is ready and receptive for something new. Jesus affirms his quest: "the wind is blowing in a new direction and it has caught you up; you shall be born anew."

Flesh begets flesh, says Christ. Stay where you are, and you can only produce more of the same, perpetuate the same old stuff. Therefore, live not in the flesh but in the Spirit, and you will be blown to new places.

Perhaps the time is right to sneak away in the dead of night, to seek a sage, or the sage-liness of the depths of your own soul... Perhaps you already know what it is that you must do, to free yourself once more of those inevitable trappings of the flesh—born of our anxiety and neediness—to receive freely the winds of the spirit. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it; you know not where it comes from, nor where it goes. But it is the Spirit of God.