

March 16, 2014 2nd Sunday in Lent Year
John 3:1-21

Night is a dark and marvelous state. Think of Night Club, Night Owl, Women of the Night, Nightshade, the darkness of night, night visions, and nighttime, or for children, "nighty night." Night is a time when we analyze things or wake up with anxieties from the day past and fears of the day to come. Night is a time when our mental hard drives reboot, and we rehash the past and plan for the future. Night is a time when the subconscious works in mysterious ways. No matter how dark it gets, morning eventually comes, slowly at first and then in full light. In that half-light between the conscious and unconscious, things from deep inside us can come to the surface and then into the full light of our awareness.

This was especially true for Nicodemus, who was a teacher of Israel. He was also a wealthy and powerful man, with all the worries of a leader in the community. There was something in his peripheral vision that was starting to eat at him. He says to Jesus, "We know you are a teacher come from God, for no one can accomplish the signs that you do unless God were with him." Up to this point in John, Jesus has accomplished two signs: he has turned water into wine, and he overturned the tables of the merchants at the Temple. Jesus was literally and figuratively turning the world upside down. The "we" Nicodemus refers to could indicate that he is speaking for his party, the Pharisees.

There were two religious groups somewhat like our two parties, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Nicodemus was astonished, amazed, and perhaps secretly pleased that Jesus had stood up to the temple cult of the Sadducees in the cleansing of the Temple episode. So he seeks out Jesus. Here is a scene where you have two of the sharpest intellects in Israel interacting. Jesus says, "No one can see the *Kingdom of God* unless you are born anew, or from above."

Nicodemus understands it as "**again**," instead of "**anew**" or "**from above**," and talks of the impossibility. But the real issue is that after witnessing customs, liturgies, and institutions renewed **when he saw water turned into wine and the Temple cleansed**, he was conflicted. He likes what he sees, but similar to most leaders, he is conservative and cautious about change, especially within himself. He struggles with the idea of himself having a new fresh start. Jesus says that the way to make things new is to begin within, to **be born of water and the Spirit**. Basically, conversion and the sign of it, baptism. Jesus then says something incredible, "**You can't predict the wind, nor control it, and you cannot predict or control those born of the Spirit**. New means something really new, not an extension, extrapolation, or straight-line projection based on the past. Jesus does not make you a better person; he makes a completely new person. This would be radical for Nicodemus." Jesus says, "**You are the teacher of Israel and you don't understand this?** If you don't understand simple metaphors, how can you understand the workings of heaven?"

So then Jesus uses an Old Testament Example, since Nicodemus was an Old Testament Scholar, and says, “**Just as Moses lifted up the brass snake on a pole in the wilderness and the people were healed, the Son of Man must be lifted up on a cross so everyone who believes in him might be saved.**” Most people think that is where the words of Jesus end, but the author of John’s gospel sums up what Jesus has said by adding two of the greatest verses in the Bible: “**For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him.**”

Calvin said that Nicodemus struggled because he engaged in over-analysis. One root of the word Pharisee is "break apart," to analyze and break things down. That was my theological teaching model, not much has changed. However, we need to see the whole picture. Leaders can often focus on the one small piece of the puzzle they understand. But the whole picture is Christ. As Calvin says, Christ is complete, and will complete you; the parts don’t matter as much as the whole.

If anyone out there is like **Nicodemus**, if you have questions that haunt you at night, if you think there is not just more to life but something really different, really exciting, really beyond our control but **as freeing as the wind, as comforting as the Spirit, you might want to believe in Jesus Christ**, and that is my prayer for everyone here.

Today we ordained and installed officers. They may stay up nights worrying and praying about their roles and our church. They may be rattled by surprises, and they may engage in over-analysis. But in John's gospel, the answer to all things is the Trinity. God sent his Son who loved us; the Spirit is sent to comfort and guide us into all truth. John's gospel claims and proclaims that the experience of the Trinity is a wonderful place to be. Looking around here at Trinity, I agree.