



“AGAINST THE WIND”
SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 12: 1-4a; JOHN 3: 1-17
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
March 12, 2017
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John 3:1-17

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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.’ ³Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ ⁴Nicodemus 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?’ ⁵Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.’ ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” ⁸The 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.’ ⁹Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ ¹⁰Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’

11 ‘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. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

(Choir Sing 16-17)

16 ‘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.

17 ‘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.

The Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God.

Look around you, friends.

You may just be sitting next to a Nicodemus. Or the person next to you may be!

Nicodemus is one of my favorite people in scripture—I feel like I know him so well.

He's a man who has official status in his community—well respected, sincere. He's a learned man—a man who knows his stuff. And he's a man who knows he still has questions.

There something endearing about a person who knows a whole lot, but who knows there is more to learn.

Why! Nicodemus sounds like a fine upstanding Presbyterian!

He's a faithful man seeking understanding.

But, even with all his earnestness, there are some things about Nicodemus that are frustrating.

He's at least a little fearful. We can't blame him. There's a lot to lose when you've got a stable place in the community—when you know where you fit and you have what you need.

Nicodemus is a little tentative—not sure how to satisfy his curiosity. Not sure he is ready to let go of the way he sees things.

He goes to see Jesus in the night—we're not sure exactly why. Maybe he was afraid of being seen. Afraid people would question why he was cozying up with this Jesus who some people were wary of, especially people like Nicodemus.

Maybe that took more courage—going in the night.

I wonder if you or I would go and see Jesus in the dark of night—when we are the most vulnerable, when things look the worst, when we feel alone and insignificant. The night has a way of making things seem daunting—would you or I have the courage to face our fears and go to see this Jesus?

Maybe Nicodemus is fearful and maybe he is courageous—maybe he is ready for something new. Maybe he's ready to venture into the shadows and find God there.

Nicodemus begins with appreciative comments when he gets to Jesus. “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.”

If you are a close reader of scripture then you know that just a few verses earlier in John's gospel Jesus said those who think they know him because of signs really don't know him at all.

Right away, Nicodemus shows us he is not really seeing Jesus clearly. And, there but by the grace of God go each and every one of us. We want to understand, we want to be Jesus followers. Can we see him for who he truly is?

Nicodemus wants and needs things to make sense. We can't fault him for that. We want the same things, right? Especially when things get messy, when there's tension and conflict, and upheaval. Especially when we are being asked to risk ourselves and the things we hold dear. We want the path we're supposed to take to be clear. And we like to have insurance that everything is going to be ok.

Nicodemus has ideas about how the world works, about how God works, about how prophets work. He is looking for a way to put Jesus in the filing system he already has in place. And Jesus just won't fit.

What do we do with this Jesus who just won't fit? Can we trust a God who just won't fit?

Right out the gate Jesus tells Nicodemus difficult truth—you won't be able to recognize the Kingdom of God unless you are born *anōthen*—that's the Greek word that we really can't figure out how to translate very well into English—Nicodemus had trouble with the word, too.

The Greek Lexicon tells us that *anōthen* is “purposely ambiguous”—it means both “from above” (like from heaven; from a divine source) and “again or anew” (like something different/a change, a rebirth). This word is a both/and word—choosing one meaning doesn't do it justice.

The NRSV chooses to have “from above” in the translation and then puts “or again” in a footnote. And NIV chooses to do the opposite—it puts “again” in the translation, and puts “from above” in its footnote. Both have left us with too clean a translation—it's too easy to feel like we have permission to choose one meaning over the other.

It's easier to know where we fit in an either/or world, who we can trust, and who we can judge.

What if Jesus was purposely ambiguous?

What if it's both/and—and we're so busy trying to make it either/or that we can't see Jesus for who he really is? And if we can't see Him for who he truly is, how can we see ourselves for who we are supposed to be—after all we're the Body of Christ in the world, right?

There's a lot of either/or talk in our world these days. Either/or defines our political discourse and our public discourse.

And there's a lot of either/or talk in the church, too. Lines are drawn, boundaries set. The church, some would say, has lost its way if it is not an either/or force in this anything goes world.

I use to be one of those either/or people. Funny, I use to think I would go into politics, too!

I use to think there was a right and a wrong on pretty much every social issue and theological issue—and if everyone could just get on the same page (and that would be the page that I was on!), then we could really change the world. The world made sense to me that way—and it gave my life purpose and clarity.

Honestly, life seemed more livable that way—that either/or way. But, this whole following Jesus thing—well He's taken me down a different path.

God didn't let me rest comfortably in an either/or world. One of the clearest ways Jesus has helped me be born *anotthen* started with a little 11-year old boy from Charlotte, North Carolina.

That little 11-year old boy is now in his 30s. Some of you met him at Christmas. When he was little he lived in the Projects across the street from our church in Charlotte. He was about to be the first kid kicked out of our church's afterschool program that served that neighborhood because he was such a behavior problem. As a last ditch effort to minister to Chris, the church asked John, who was coaching for the Panthers at the time, to come and read with Chris once a week. They thought an NFL coach might be someone this little boy might listen to.

John fell in love with Chris quickly and so did I, and almost as quickly the hard realities of Chris' life came crashing into our world. I can remember coming home sometimes and locking all the doors and closing all the blinds—I just wanted it to all go away. It was more than I wanted to know so up close.

We thought we knew about poverty, about race, about injustice, about abuse. And we thought we could help him see who he could be. We never imagined how much he would help us see who we could be.

Loving him has showed us the ambiguity in life that cannot be tidied up. So much is not fair; so much cannot be remedied. So many unmet needs are never resolved.

And there are also times when I can see God's unique power to transform so clearly that I am in awe of how God works in such ambiguous spaces.

The only consistency we have in our relationship is love—ours for Chris and his for us.

He's taught me more about race and injustice and what my whiteness means than anything else in my life. Loving him, listening to him, walking along with him— it is a blessing and it is at times unbearable; it is sad and it is delightful; it is frustrating and it is humbling.

Sometimes I want it to be either/or—Chris helps me see what's really true about walking with Jesus—we're called to be both/and people in an either/or world.

Such a call is a chilling invitation AND it gives us freedom like nothing else can.

It's hard to imagine that both can be true—a blood chilling truth and a life-giving freedom.

The divide today may come down to this stubborn need we humans have for things to be either this way or that way. We like either/or—both/and feels impossible, chaotic, and undisciplined. We're afraid we'll get lost in a both/and world where it seems like anything goes, like everything is relative.

Jesus is trying to get us to see something altogether different than moral chaos— he's talking about living close enough to him that we “are not astonished” by the way the Spirit moves—“The wind blows where it will—you might hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes.”

Spirit and wind—*pneuma* is the Greek for both words; we can't pick and choose our meaning—we must abide in the complexity of God who can be perceived, like wind, but not exactly understood.

Trying to live against the wind exhausts and depletes us, even as trusting such an unpredictable force is not something we're sure we know how to do.

Trusting God may be the thing we need the most practice at doing—trusting that God's healing and God's eternity is something we can be close to, that we can touch and drink in and breathe it in even in a world that builds walls and tells us lies about ourselves and about each other.

How can these things be?

Jesus' only answer is “come closer.”

He says you have to know him up close.

Jesus is a both/and savior—human and divine; strong and weak; compassionate and just; patient and angry; loving and truthful; suffering and powerful.

He can trouble the water and calm the storm.

He can heal your wounds and disrupt your comfort. Jesus is a both/and savior in an either/or world.

The irony is that one of the passages Christians have used to prop up an either/or mentality is right here in this Nicodemus story—John 3:16 “for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him many not perish but have eternal life.”

We’ve used it to determine who is in and who is out. We’ve made it an either/or statement.

Here’s where Jesus comes in.

You are being born, he says. You are being born into a way of being that is new and different—a both/and world where there is both concreteness and mystery. You have a divine spark in you and you are broken.

You and I came here today—faithful people seeking understanding, holding all these contradictions, all this ambiguity, this confounding and confusing way that God made us.

We came here seeking community—and seeking God’s hopes for us.

You want to grow, to learn, to know more about what following Jesus is all about. Like Nicodemus, we fine upstanding Presbyterians, have some questions about how these things can be.

How does God call us to be faithful people in a world so divided with itself?

Brothers and sisters, you may be sitting next to Nicodemus—or the person next to you may be. Or you just might be listening to Nicodemus preach a sermon this morning. I’ll admit it—I have lots of questions these days—and I am not sure I want anyone to know just what those questions are—I look for Jesus, sometimes in the night, just like Nicodemus did.

Truth be told, brothers and sisters, I don’t always know how to follow Jesus and be whatever it is to be a good Presbyterian, too.

Our brother Nicodemus didn’t stop with his questions. He moves in John’s Gospel into even riskier territory. In Chapter 7, as his Pharisaic colleagues were busy condemning Jesus before he had been tried, Nicodemus advocated for Jesus and said he deserved a fair hearing.

And in Chapter 19, after Jesus’ execution, Nicodemus brings 100 lbs of spices and herbs to properly prepare Jesus’ ravaged body for a proper burial.

Nicodemus moves from a questioner in the night, to an advocate for Jesus among his colleagues and peers, to someone willing to put his body in the same space as a violated and betrayed body.

Can we come out of the shadows and skepticism of our belief and follow Jesus all the way to cross? Can we truly take in the world changing power of Jesus' incarnation and simultaneously understand the mystery of his crucifixion and resurrection?

God's love has the power to transform us into people willing to put our bodies in the same spaces of bodies under threat, bodies betrayed, bodies suffering under the weight of oppression and abusive power—that is what God did for us.

As our discernment around Sanctuary continues, Nicodemus holds a mirror up to us that may be hard for us to see. Nicodemus followed Jesus into a space of utter vulnerability where he may have learned something that remains a mighty struggle for us—how to follow Jesus far enough that we stop counting the cost.

What that looks like for Grace Covenant remains to be seen.

How can these things be?

How can you and I really be born *anotthen*—remade, reborn, changed, transformed? How can we trust a God who doesn't always fit, a both/and savior in an either/or world?

The mystery of this invitation is tenacious. The dissonance of our faith is unresolvable. Coming close to Jesus does not tidy up ambiguity; instead it gives us the courage to see him here in the way we learn to live truthfully together.

If it weren't for Jesus, I'd have given up a long time ago.

He says to follow him—and I say we keep trying—keep asking our questions, especially the ones that haunt us in the night.

Maybe trusting this Jesus who heals and troubles, who guides and hopes we'll find our way, this both/and savior in an either/or world—maybe trusting this Jesus will be what saves us after all.

Thanks be to God.

