

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Lent
February 23, 202

He Came to Jesus By Night
John 3:1-17; Genesis 12:1-4a

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.

This is no incidental detail of the text. In the gospel of John the world is a place of darkness. Jesus is the *“light that shines in the darkness...
...and the darkness did not overcome it.”*

So here comes Nicodemus in the middle of the night...not by foot, or by horse, but “by” night...almost as if the night itself had carried him to Jesus.

Travelling by night can be a fearful thing to do. Especially the older you get. I have always pictured Nicodemus as being one of Jerusalem’s prominent senior citizens. Perhaps, like some of you, he was reluctant to go out after dark. The night is the place where danger is lurking, and where the winding road is hard to follow. Out in the dark, if something were to happen to Nicodemus, no one would discover him until the next morning.

Yet on this occasion something was urgent enough to bring him out into that darkness...to see Jesus.

Have you ever met with Jesus in secret? Perhaps, like Nicodemus, you have a reputation to maintain, an image. You have problems in your life that you want to talk to Jesus about, but you can’t allow anyone else to know about them. You prefer to keep them in the dark where they come from.

Or you have doubts, and fears, that you must hide so no one finds out about the grave questions – questions about God – you harbor deep in the dark places of your soul. So, like Nicodemus, you come to Jesus under cover – maybe not the cover of darkness, but under the cover of coat and tie and Sunday dress – hoping no else sees through it all to the real reason you’re here.

Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; he says, “for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

Nicodemus has heard the stories – news travels fast in Jerusalem.
Water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana.

Then more miraculous signs in Jerusalem. Nicodemus likes signs.
But don’t we all? Aren’t we all looking for proof that Jesus really is who people say he is and can do what he promises? Proof in our own lives? Something obvious that will settle the matter once and for all. No more uncertainty.

We come looking for settled certainty and clear proof...but Jesus gives us a mystery. Jesus gives us something beyond evidence. *“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”*

Something must happen to us that comes from beyond us. Something that has nothing to do with proof, or certainty, or rational choice. We must be *born from above*. And who has any control over that? Which of us here chose to be born. Who among us, in those months that we were being carried around in our mother’s womb, chose the time of our arrival? Which of us weighed the alternatives, assessed the costs and the benefits, and then made a conscious, considered decision to be born? Just like our first experience of birth, being born from above is completely out of our control. Only God can make it happen.

It’s a little confusing. We thought if we would just say the right words...repeat the right prayer...muster up enough faith. But how can this be...that the kingdom of God is so utterly beyond our grasp. *How can anyone be born after having grown old? How does this faith work?*

So now Jesus begins to talk about water and the Spirit, and it’s clear that we’re losing control of this conversation. We tried to keep it all within the categories we understand, but Jesus words are bursting out all over, giving birth to new meaning. *“No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of the water and the Spirit.”*

We’re not sure what this means except that Water and Wind are never neat and tidy. Baptism can be messy, even for us Presbyterians. There’s the preacher with his robe and his worship book, trying to do everything decently and in order...

and then the water splashes from the bowl,
dripping on the floor and across the book, wrinkling the pages,
and onto the clothes and then the hair,
and then running down the face.

Water always seems to thwart our attempts to confine it. It rarely goes exactly where we want it to go. We try to channel it, but water has a mind of its own. It breaks out of the banks of the river and floods the cities and the fields and gets into places where we live. And there’s little we can do to control it. That’s what it’s like to be born from above.

Or it’s like the wind that blows through the open window and across the desk, and messes up all the neatly arranged papers. All our efforts to organize life according to our plans get blown on to the floor into a new pattern, and only God knows what it all means. The wind changes things.

*The wind blows where it chooses,” Jesus says,
and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know where it come from or where it goes.
So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*

Nicodemus is still confused. *How can these things be?*

We live in a world that yearns for certainty. We deal in facts.

There are even those nowadays who would turn the Christian faith into a scientifically verifiable religion...they set out to prove that the world is 4000 years old, so as to prop up the Genesis stories with scientific evidence...or to prove by some astronomical calculation that it can be proven how the sun stood still while Israel fought the battle, just like the Bible says...they have even in recent years tried to analyze the shroud of Turin, looking for physical proof of Christ's resurrection. We are a people looking for signs. For evidence on which our faith can rest.

And we look for signs inside our lives, as well. We want to see evidence that God is blessing us. A life where things work out according to our plans. But the road often takes unexpected turns. And we wonder if we've been led in the wrong direction. Where is God in this darkness?

So we sneak over to Jesus by night, and ask for a sign....

We ask for just enough water to wet our lips.

And we'd like a little breeze, but nothing too strong.

And we'd like just a little inconspicuous light that doesn't attract too much attention, just bright enough to show us the way.

But instead Jesus warns of a flood of water
that might wash away the plans we've made.

He tells us about a wind
strong enough to knock down the house
we've so carefully constructed around our lives.

And he offers us the light which enlightens everyone,
at light which, if we walk by it,
will certainly make us stand out and look different
and be noticed by the world.

Just as Jesus will be noticed before long.

He will shine so brightly that those who live in darkness will notice him, and many will be threatened by his light. And the wind will blow in its own strange way with Jesus... "*just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, (you remember the story of Moses lifting up the serpent wrapped around a pole so that all the people who looked at it would be healed. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent...) so the Son of Man must be lifted up...*"

...not up to a throne, but to a cross.

Then we will have our sign.

In the thick darkness of that day we will have our sign. There we will find our proof. If we believe in him there – on the cross where he is lifted up – there we will begin to have *eternal life*.

It seems that for Nicodemus, and for us, it's either all or nothing. There's no such thing as being a little bit born. If we want the Water and the Spirit and the Light, we have to have the Cross.

At the cross

we begin to realize what Jesus is talking about when he says we must be born from above; we begin to see all the things to which we must die:
self-made plans, when they are contrary to God's will for us.
reputation, when it makes us too proud to repent of our sin.
control we strive to maintain, when it causes us to forget
our complete dependence on God.

At the cross

we begin to see how much this God was willing to give up
to show his love for the world;
a love willing to risk everything for us.
a love big enough even for people like Nicodemus, like you and me, who
sneak around at night looking for a way to get right with God without having to
change very much. Even we are not outside the realm of God's great love...

Indeed, John says,

God does not condemn those who come in the night
looking for shallow certitude.
God does not condemn us, but beckons us forward,
step by fearful step.

As Abraham and Sarah were called to follow God to an unknown place,
we are called
not to a faith based on clear evidence,
but
to be caught up in a movement of the Spirit, a movement into risk;
to be swept away by a holy rush of water breaking forth with new life.

Trust me, Jesus says, and you will not perish,
but you will have eternal life.