

Sermon for Lent II Year A 2020
When the Wind Blows . . .

This gospel story of Nicodemus and Jesus
has me thinking about a very familiar
lullaby—*Rock-a-bye baby on the tree top,
when the wind blows, the cradle with rock . . .*

Come on now . . . I know you get my drift.
Whether or not you do,
here are the verses that have me
thinking in terms of this cradle chestnut:
*You must be born from above
The wind blows where it chooses
Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness*
(okay, this is probably the most obscure reference—
because we need to make the leap to the “tree” of the cross--)

Most of us know the heart of today’s gospel lesson,
the “chestnut” or “gospel in a nutshell” verse:
For God so loved the world that God gave . . .

I don’t know for certain,
but I’d nearly bet the house and the farm
that first bible verse I memorized . . .
and perhaps most of you . . .
that John chapter 3, verse 16
was the first bible verse you and I ever memorized.
If not in Sunday school,
then perhaps in Confirmation or
in several Sunday morning sermons—

maybe in bible study?—
you and I heard that Martin Luther (our founding father)
said that John 3:16 was the “the heart of the gospel,
the gospel in miniature”—

And so it is.

It is in some ways easy enough to be taught to a babe in a cradle,
as it is complex enough to intrigue a theologian,
a grown-up seeker after the truth and the things of God.

Enter Nicodemus.

The name “Nicodemus” means in Greek:

the “victory of the people”—

oddly enough,

Nicodemus is the least popular of biblical names . . .

although Charles Dickens made a reference to this NT character
in his story, *Our Mutual Friend*, by naming a main character—
Noddy Boffin . . .

This man who comes in the middle of the night,
seeking enlightenment,

is named—literally—“the victory of the common people”—
though Nicodemus comes asking many questions—

if we read through to the very end of the gospel of John—
he hears and finds many answers

in the life, death and resurrection of the “Rabbi” (or Teacher)
who he acknowledges has come from God.

No wonder Jesus gently chides Nicodemus with the question,
“Are you a teacher of Israel,
and yet you do not understand . . . ?”

I have to wonder.

Is this a question Jesus asks only of Nicodemus?

Or to all of us.

Yes, we may be able to answer the question—

What is the gospel in a “nutshell”?

And yet . . . what do we truly understand of Jesus’ twenty-seven word statement that speak of and describes God’s love,

a cherished world,

a self-giving Son,

a universal invitation,

a deliverance from death,

and a promise of eternal life.

Rock-a-bye baby on the treetop . . . indeed!

Is this the gospel in a child-size portion?

Well, I’m not so sure.

The problem is not with the verse or message itself,

but . . . as always . . . was we or the “church” so often does with it or interprets it.

In our well-intentioned efforts to make the gospel message accessible and palatable,

we often seek to reduce salvation to a soundbite,

forgetting that when Jesus originally spoke these words to

Nicodemus—a Pharisee—a member of the Sanhedrin—

and likely one of the most educated men of his day—

his listener found Jesus’ words incomprehensible.

How can these things be?

Nicodemus expresses what most of us are likely only thinking—

am I right? This is the question most of us are asking

of Jesus and of God and of the Holy Spirit nearly 24/7.

Now, as a man who likely had very little contact with the very earthy, even messy, way Jesus talks about God's entry into the world and everyday life, in terms of birth, flesh, water, and spirit, that is—we can sympathize with Nicodemus' confusion (which may actually be his polite revulsion) at the earthy human-ness of the "Teacher" who comes from above and his graphic description of spiritual things.

But Jesus is unfazed by the Pharisee's confusion and refuses to simplify his explanation.

If he intended to "save" Nicodemus quickly and easily that night, then Jesus failed.

What the seeker experienced that night was not salvation—or the "aha" moment of complete enlightenment—no, what Nicodemus experienced was confusion and bewilderment—in short, you could say that while Nicodemus received the "ultimate" answer—he left with more questions.

So . . . what do we say or think or learn from this story of Nicodemus and Jesus?

If Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus is representative of God's "preferred evangelism style," then I have to wonder:

What does our formulaic approach to Christianity leave out? Are we, the church, so invested in keeping the faith cozy and comfortable, that we minimize its strangeness, its otherness, its offensiveness?

Please notice that Jesus had no problem
leaving Nicodemus confused and muddled.
Jesus was in no hurry
to get Nicodemus to “sign on the dotted line.”
The Spirit blows where it chooses . . .
Or in the words of our familiar lullaby
when the wind blows . . .
it’s not just the cradle that is rocked,
it might actually be whole world.
The Spirit cannot be caged or contained.
Which means the journey of faith
and the workings of salvation cannot be caged or contained.

When we speak of God’s kingdom,
we are in a realm of deep mystery . . .
or at the precipice of the treetops if you will.
We are infants in the cradle.
And it’s okay to be surprised.
And it’s okay to not fully understand.
It’s okay to take our time—
as those who have everything to learn need to do.

After all, what Jesus was offering Nicodemus—and all of us—
is not a “tune-up” or a few minor tweaks
to an already near-perfect life.
No, what Jesus has on offer is a brand-new life.
A new birth.
A fresh, down to the foundations beginning.

But what newborn enters the world without birth pangs, shock,
disorientation, or pain?

Frankly, I'm glad I don't have any memories of my actual birth from the coziness of the womb into the harsh light of day. So downright bewilderment isn't the exception in a birth story, it's the rule.

If we don't find Christianity at least a little bit confusing, a bit disorienting, a lot challenging, then, perhaps, it's not Christianity we have practicing.

As I sit with Nicodemus' baffled reaction to Jesus, here's what I ask of myself:
what does my glib reading of John 3:16 prevent me from seeing about God, Christ, faith, sin, and salvation?
Do I and the church at times lean too hard on the importance of individual belief, and forget the stunning truth that God loves and longs for *all* of creation—quite apart from my belief or unbelief?
Do I treat Jesus' words as a litmus test—using them not to communicate God's *all-encompassing* compassion and mercy, but to threaten unbelievers with God's judgment?
Do you and I allow our interpretation of the gospel to flatten and distort the meaning of "belief"—reducing its nuance and complexity to mere intellection assent?
What does it mean, after all, to say, "I believe in Jesus"?
Why is "belief" of all things so important to God?

Here's something we should consider—
especially as we hear today's gospel—
The English word “believe” comes from the German word
belieben—which is the German word for love.
To believe is not to hold an opinion
To believe is to treasure.
To hold something as “beloved.”
To give my heart over to the “beloved” without reservation.
To believe in something is to invest it with my love.

This is true in the ancient languages of Hebrew and Greek—
the original languages of our scriptures.
When the writers of the Hebrew and NT wrote of faithfulness,
they were not writing about an intellectual surrender
to a factual truth.
They were writing about fidelity, trust, and confidence.
As they saw it, to believe in God
was to place their full confidence in him.
To throw their whole hearts minds, and bodies into his hands.

Here's the thing:
I can't think of any significant human relationships
in which *doctrine* matters more than love and trust?
How could our relationship with God be any different?

What does it mean to believe in Jesus?
To hold onto him? To trust him with my life?
For Nicodemus, (for the “victory of the people”)
it meant starting anew—letting go of all he though he knew and
understood about the life of faith.

It meant being “born again”—becoming a newborn—
vulnerable, hungry, and ready—
to receive reality in a brand new way.
It meant coming out of the darkness and risking the light.
None of these could be reduced
to a litmus test or a simplistic statement of faith.

The work of trusting Jesus was – and is –
mind-bending, soul-altering work—it is hard and it take time.
It involves setbacks, fears and disappointments.

Can you blame Nicodemus
for walking away baffled that first night?
Jesus was calling him to so much more
than a rote recitation of the scripture or some doctrine of faith—
or in the words of one of my seminary professors:
“justification by right answer.”

No. Jesus was calling Nicodemus to love.
To fall in love and stay in love.
Why is belief—*belieben*—so important to God?
Because *love* is not only important but the “all-in-all” for God.
To believe is to “be-love.”

Gospel in a nutshell sounds catchy—
but when all is said and done,
soundbites and easy answers don’t serve us or anyone very well.
After all, in the season of Lent, we are in the wilderness now.
Wandering, thirsting, yearning, waiting, and listening
go with the territory.

Yes! Memorize and cherish the words of John 3:16
*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.*

But don't forget to go all the way to John 3:17:
*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.*

Yet, the way of faith it points to is as vast and mysterious as all
of the workings of a human heart reaching out for God's
That's why we can trust it;
its challenge corresponds to reality.
Because God's love is rich, demanding, costly, and free.
For God so loved the world . . .
is only the beginning.