

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Second Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 5, 2023
10am

Text: John 3:1-17 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

In our gospel lesson, a man named Nicodemus makes a clandestine visit to Jesus in the dead of night. Night is symbolic in John's gospel. It represents unbelief and a lack of spiritual discernment – in contrast to the light of God that shines in Jesus.

One of the spiritual wildernesses we periodically wander is the wilderness of unknowing. This wilderness has other names. St. John of the Cross, a 16th century Spanish mystic, called it the “dark night of the soul.”¹ This dark night has come to represent painful seasons in our life when we feel abandoned by God. But this is not how John of the Cross used the phrase. His dark night of the soul refers to the point in our spiritual journey when we encounter aspects of God that are hidden from human knowledge. God challenges and transcends our comprehension.

Western Christianity, especially Protestantism, has always been very intellectual; we put a lot of emphasis on understanding God with our minds and using reason to discern God's nature. In general, our tradition has a low tolerance for mystery. I recently caught up on the phone with one of my closest friends. We grew up in the same church, but she no longer attends regularly. We talked about the difference between the faith we inherited as children and the faith we now have as adults. She lamented that the Church does not create sufficient space for people to experience doubt, ask questions, and challenge assumptions about what it means to follow Jesus. I know that many people in my generation have left the Church for this reason. While they remain spiritually curious, they are also deconstructing – taking apart – their former religious worldview. They are choosing which pieces to keep and which pieces to let go of. And they are embracing mystery as a core component of their faith.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_Night_of_the_Soul

My acceptance of God's call to professional ministry also began in a wilderness of deconstruction. When I graduated from college, I took steps to pursue a career as a military lawyer. I felt called to that vocation, felt that it was God's will, and believe to this day that God was prepared to bless that path. But circumstances outside my control blocked the way. For months I felt abandoned by God. I had been taught that God's plan for my life was predetermined and it was my job to simply trust and follow the path God had laid. But instead, I found myself wandering in a wilderness of unknowing. I no longer understood with my head the role of God's will in my life. My experience led me to question, take apart, and examine my beliefs about the will of God.

One day in deep frustration I howled at heaven, "Tell me what you want me to do with my life!"

The Holy Spirit responded, "What do *you* want to do?"

That question left me deeply unsettled.

[pause]

After his conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus is also left feeling 'unsettled,' and rightly so – that is Jesus' intention! He is purposefully unsettling Nicodemus' worldview. He wants Nicodemus to let go of what he thinks he knows about being a person of faith. This is a tall order for Nicodemus. He is a Pharisee, religious teacher, a thinker. His leadership is based on his knowledge of the Jewish religion. That night Nicodemus comes to Jesus representing his fellow Pharisees. He says, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God" (v. 2). Nicodemus and the other Pharisees think they know who Jesus is – a teacher of the Law, like them. At first, they were skeptical that Jesus was sent by God, but after they saw him perform a few miracles, they were convinced.

Jesus is clear, though, that if we want to follow him our belief cannot depend on signs and wonders. Our belief cannot depend on physical evidence. Our belief cannot even depend on what we think we know about God.

Faith is belief that persists despite the gaps in our knowledge, despite the wilderness seasons of unknowing and deconstruction. Nicodemus thinks he

knows who Jesus is and therefore understands why he has come. But Jesus is about to show Nicodemus how little he actually does know. Instead of confirming Nicodemus' self-professed knowledge, he challenges what Nicodemus thinks it means to be a person of faith.

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (v. 3). The Greek word for ‘born from above’ is *anōthen*. It has a double-meaning: It means both ‘from above’ and ‘anew’ or ‘again.’ Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus’ meaning and thinks Jesus says we must literally be born again. But it’s not physically possible for a person to crawl back into their mother’s womb and be born a second time!

Nicodemus’ strict worldview is keeping him from grasping Jesus’ meaning, but Jesus is a patient teacher. “No one can enter the kingdom of God,” he says, “without being born of water and Spirit [capital ‘S’]. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit [capital ‘S’] is spirit [lowercase ‘s’]...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” (vv. 5-6, 8).

What does this mean?

It helps to know that Jesus is making yet another play on words. When he says we are born of water, he is referring to the waters of our mother’s womb – the flesh born from flesh. As Christians, we also hear an allusion to the waters of baptism, where we die to our old life and are raised to our new life in Jesus. But baptism is not just a ritual of water. It is also a ritual of the Spirit. Just as Jesus received the Holy Spirit at his baptism, marking him as God’s beloved Son, we too receive the gift of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands, marking us as God’s beloved children.

So, to be born from above – born anew – born *anōthen* – is to receive the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is like the wind (this is yet another play on words – the Greek word for ‘spirit,’ *pneuma*, also means ‘breath’ or ‘wind’); she blows where she chooses. She is not confined by the limitations of human knowledge and human institutions. In her mission to grow and sanctify us as disciples, the Holy

Spirit will stretch our faith beyond the comfortable bounds of what we think we know about God.

[pause]

This was my experience of the Spirit during my wilderness season of unknowing. I thought I knew how the will of God in my life worked. It took wandering in the unknown, and that startling question from the Spirit – “What do *you* want to do?” – for me to begin unraveling a theological framework that no longer served me. In that startling and unsettling question, I eventually heard an invitation. The Spirit was inviting me to partner with her in co-creating my future. No longer was my life a book that was already written; instead, God and I were writing it together.

Such freedom there is to be found in the Spirit’s wild invitation to let go of our intellectual pride and instead allow ourselves to be surprised by God! As I began to accept a different way of approaching my future, I no longer felt abandoned by God. Instead, my relationship with God deepened as I more fully experienced what it means to follow a God who “descended from heaven” and intimately partners with me in life.

For this is the great mystery that John 3:16 proclaims: “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.”

We are not saved through our knowledge of God, our intellectual grasp of doctrine and Scripture, or our stubborn rejection of doubt and the unknowable. We are saved through the belief that a relationship with Jesus makes a difference. Eternal life is ours because we have a relationship with our God in heaven through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This relationship is dynamic. It is meant to reshape us and redefine us, change us and challenge us, stretch the boundaries of our knowing so we can begin to comprehend the boundless love of God. This is what it means to be born of the Spirit – because it is the Spirit that helps us see and understand the heart of God that is revealed in Jesus. The Spirit empowers our comprehension, leading us nearer and nearer to God’s heart – a heart so bent on love it descended from heaven to earth so we can experience eternal life.

The gospel definition of eternal life is not merely a future hope in the resurrection. It is also a present reality. Eternal life is a Spirit-led way of living that we receive when we are born from above. In her artist statement for “The Wind Blows” [artwork on screen], Hannah Garrity writes, “It is not a profession of faith that allows one to live like the wind. Plenty of people who believe do not live such a life. Rather, it is a moment-by-moment intention to be aware of God’s presence. It is a minute-by-minute appreciation for the amazing life we have been given. It is a deep breath and a slower-paced walk. It is a freedom unparalleled. It is an ability to see the forest and the trees. This space in the Spirit is deep and wide.”²

This space in the Spirit can also feel deeply unsettling. It can leave us scared and unmoored. But even when the Spirit is leading us into the wilderness of unknowing – challenging our faith, deconstructing what we thought we knew about God – the cross of Jesus remains our compass. It is the supreme reminder that Jesus has forever connected heaven and earth and brought eternity to the present. He descended and ascended along the line of the cross, this wondrous expression of God’s unending love. So when you find yourself wandering in a wilderness of unknowing, look up! Look up and fix your eyes on Jesus.

Amen.

² Artist statement for “The Wind Blows” by Hannah Garrity. Inspired by John 3:1-17. Graphic image. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.