

Blowing in the Wind

“The answers, my friend, are blowing in the wind.” –Bob Dylan

John 3: 1-17

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

Have you ever had a moment when you were trying to communicate something important to someone who just wasn’t getting it? Maybe like how a parent feels sometimes when trying to communicate to their child—or how a child feels when trying to communicate with a parent. Or like that stereotypical example, when a wife yells at her husband, “Are you listening?” And he says, “What?” Or maybe it is more like what we hear from our friends of color who are tired of trying to talk to white folk about racism in America because they just aren’t getting it. Jesus is trying to communicate to Nicodemus what it means to be a part of the kingdom of God. Good old Nick, bless his heart, is trying to understand, but he’s just not getting it.

Well, the truth is Jesus is not the easiest person to understand. Many have read Jesus’ red-letter words for a long time and still aren’t getting it either. He speaks in hyperbole and metaphorical banter. He threads clunky abstract thoughts together that are impossible to track with, especially in John’s gospel: “No one can see the kingdom unless they are born from above. The wind blows where it will and so it is with every child born of the Spirit. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so too must the son of man be lifted up.” Be honest: if we heard a preacher speaking this way we would think they had lost it. It is how we end up taking Jesus’ words and creating shallow ‘born again’ theologies or five step formulas to heaven. When it comes to understanding the kingdom of God, Jesus does not make it simple. So Nicodemus doesn’t get it. And if we are honest, we probably don’t fully get it either.

Except step back and examine the characters in the story. On the one hand, Nicodemus is an institutional leader like me. He belongs to a system and its traditions. He has taken vows to a denomination and has adopted a way of thinking about who and what and how God functions. Nicodemus is an invested member of the establishment.

Jesus, on the other hand, is the Word that becomes flesh. He stood with God and was God in the beginning as they dotted the constellations and organized the cosmos. In John's gospel, Jesus and Nicodemus are from different worlds. And Jesus has not come down to fit snugly into our way of doing things. Jesus has come as the birther of a new creation movement to a world who prefers the status quo. He comes as the light that shines in the darkness who bears truth and grace in a world too often full of lies and cruelty. Two different worlds. Maybe it is difficult to understand Jesus because we expect his world to fit into ours, rather than our world to fit into his.

But here's the good news: We can't control God. We know this, yet we still try! God's wind blows where it will. Sure, God can use the systems we've created for the good, but God refuses to be limited by them. It's good news. God will not be hijacked by right-wing agendas. God will not be distorted by white nationalism. God will not be monopolized even by Christian doctrine or the church's walls. God's Spirit is—what do y'all say in the south?—"wide-open!" She is building hope through grassroot movements like the Poor People's Campaign. She is swirling up justice through the Black Lives Matter movement. She is sending gusts through the native lands where water protectors stand against Goliath oil industries in the name of preserving the world God loves. For God so loves the world, God sends Jesus. And Jesus sends not only us, but anyone who is willing and paying attention. God's Spirit is not picky! The wind blows where it will. Wild and free.

The question is: how do we catch the momentum of the Spirit? It is what Nicodemus wants to know. Jesus answer that we need to be born anew. It's not a one-time thing either, we are being born anew again and again and again. It's an interesting metaphor. Being born isn't something we can choose. It is something that is done unto us. How many of us remember being born? Just as we are birthed into this world, God is birthing us into a new reality. All we can do is surrender and be delivered.

This week marked six years of us being in ministry together. We have been through some things. There have been some contractions and some labor pains as well as beautiful things birthed. There were times when things got messy, but anyone who has experienced childbirth knows that with new life comes messiness sometimes. For the last six years, we have become each other's midwives. Helping God's Spirit to birth us into new life again and again...and again.

You see, Nicodemus shows up two more times in the story. A few chapters later Jesus is arrested for talking crazy again, and it is Nicodemus who tries to convince the leaders into listening to what Jesus has to say. And it seems that he still doesn't quite get it yet. But then he shows up once more. At the end of the gospel. And it is when Nicodemus visits Jesus at the cross. He helps pull Jesus' lifeless body down and gently wraps Jesus with myrrh and aloes. And whereas a

couple pounds of oils and spices would have sufficed, the text says he brings one hundred pounds (!) instead. Now some would probably say, "One hundred pounds!? It is absurd. It doesn't make sense. It's wasteful. And what is an old man doing carrying around one hundred pounds of anything!" But then there are others who would see this differently and would reply, "Yes, it is all those things. But it is also full of gospel generosity and kingdom abundance." For God so loved the world, God gave God's only son so that all who believed would not perish, but inherit abundant life. Throughout the story, Nicodemus is like us. He is born again and again and again until eventually, he is delivered at the foot of the cross, where finally, he gets it.

Suddenly, Jesus's words make a lot more sense. "The wind blows where it will and so it is with every child born of the Spirit."