

Wind Surfing

John 3: 1-17

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2** 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.” **3** Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” **4** 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?” **5** Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. **6** 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.” **9** Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” **10** Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

“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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that God 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 made whole through him.

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2** 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.” **9** 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?”

“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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that God 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 made whole through him.

If you could ask Jesus one question, what would it be? Maybe we ask him if he really walked on water? Or maybe we go deeper wondering why a loving God would allow so much suffering in the world? Or maybe we ask him what he thinks of Christianity these days? Nicodemus sneaks out after curfew to pay Jesus a visit. And after listening to Jesus blabber on about being born again from above, good ol’ Nicodemus asks him a question: “How can anyone be born again?”

Well, to start we can admit that as Jesus answers, he is not the easiest person to understand. He speaks in hyperbole and metaphorical banter. He threads clunky abstract thoughts. “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 of God. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so too must the Son of Man be lifted up.” I mean, honestly if we heard a preacher speaking this way to us, we would assume they had lost it. Perhaps is why we end up manufacturing literal “born again” theories. When it comes to understanding what Jesus is trying to say, he does not make it easy. So Nicodemus doesn’t get it. And to be truthful, we don’t always get it either.

Except step back and examine the characters in the story. On the one hand, we have good ol’ Nic. He’s a leader in a religious institution, like me. He belongs to a system and its traditions. He has taken vows to uphold a way of thinking about who God is and how God functions. Then there’s Jesus. The Word that becomes flesh. The one who was with God at the beginning. You see, in John’s gospel Jesus and Nicodemus are from two different worlds. And Jesus hasn’t come to fit snugly into our way of doing things. He comes to shine a light of truth on a world which prefers to live empires of illusion, and grace upon a word which too often defaults to cruelty. Two characters from two different worlds.

But here’s the consolation: as difficult as Jesus might be to understand, one thing seems clear: God’s wind is active! God’s Spirit is wild and free. Which means God cannot be hijacked by political extremist agendas. God cannot be held hostage by white nationalism. God’s Spirit cannot be detained by border control. God’s Spirit is—how do y’all say it in the South—“wide open.” Which means God’s children must keep wide open as well if we are going to catch the breeze. Has anyone here ever wind surfed? You know, where you are standing on a surf board, with a sail which scoots along the water. What happens if the sails are closed? We sink! We don’t move anywhere! God’s wind is wild and free, which means God’s children are wind surfers whose sails are wide open as well.

So back to old Nicodemus’ question. How can we be born anew of the Spirit? It’s an interesting metaphor. For one thing, being birthed isn’t something we choose for ourselves. It is something which is done unto us. And it’s not a one-time event, either. We are being born again and again and again. This text was preached three years ago, on the week before we went on Covid-19 lock down. Overnight, it seemed like things changed. You might recall, our collective church scrambled. We all got Zoom accounts and worshiped in our robes with our coffee. Other times the internet froze—just as the sermon was getting good. I remember one week Zoom got so overwhelmed it crashed. The church broke the internet! We had no choice but to go with the flow and in some odd way, we were being born again. Then six months ago, some in our neighborhood popped into worship who didn’t speak English. Erica helped that first week, and then Megan stepped in. And then we started doing our bulletins bi-lingual, and the mutual sense was they became part of the family. We were wind surfing! I’m not convinced that would’ve happened unless our sails were wide open. And the result is that we were born again, again. It’s not a one-time event. It’s a process of becoming as we open up wind surfing in whatever direction God’s Spirit is blowing us again and again and again.

You see, when it comes to Nicodemus, it's easy to forget that he answers his own question about being born again eventually. He actually shows up three times in the gospel. Here, where he sneaks out at night and doesn't get it. Then, a few chapters later when Jesus is arrested for talking crazy—surprise, surprise—and it is Nicodemus who says to the other religious leaders, “Now hold on. Let's hear what he has to say.” And while he tries to be helpful, it seems he hasn't fully gotten it yet. But then he shows up once more. At the end of the gospel when he visits Jesus on the cross. There Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, helps pull down Jesus' and tenderly wraps his lifeless body with myrrh and aloes. And while a couple pounds of oils and spices would have been more than enough, the text tells us Nicodemus brought one-hundred pounds!

First of all, it is an absurd amount! Secondly, what is an old man doing carrying one-hundred pounds of anything? It is absurd and doesn't make any sense! But then we remember Jesus' words: “No one can see the kingdom unless they are born from above.” And while one hundred pounds seems absurd, what we are witnessing is Nicodemus wind surfing—being born again and again, until finally he finds himself living inside of the kingdom's generous abundance...and it is there at the foot of the cross where he gets it.

And then, suddenly Jesus' words begin to make a lot more sense. The wind blows where it will and so it is with every child born of the Spirit. For God so loved the world, God send Jesus so that all who believed would not perish, but live a generous, abundant life.