

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Second Sunday in Lent- February 17, 2008

Scripture lessons: Psalm 121 & John 3:1-17

GOING DEEP

Several weeks ago in this sermon time, we celebrated the assurance our faith gives that God always welcomes our seeking. We remembered Scriptures like these:

From the prophet Jeremiah- "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare . . . when you call upon me . . . I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart" (29:11-13). From the prophet Isaiah- "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near" (55:6). And from Jesus in Matthew, chapter 7- "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you" (verse 7).

Today's second Scripture reading gives us more good news about God's welcome of our seeking. It might not appear exactly as good news at first and it comes to us through one of the Bible's most difficult passages to understand. But if we go deep with it we'll see that it's *great* news. It's revealed in the way Jesus welcomes a distinguished seeker named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is a learned man and a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin's the governing council for Jewish religious and political life in Jesus' day. Nicodemus is high on the social and religious ladder of his society, but he still comes to Jesus looking for something more.

He first approaches Jesus with deference, but maybe a little condescension, too, for Jesus, after all, is only a wandering preacher from Galilee. Wandering preachers are common in their time and place and when compared to the cultural setting to which Nicodemus is accustomed in Jerusalem, Galilee's not well-known for producing important people.

So Nicodemus politely addresses Jesus as "Rabbi", but also gets right to the point about why he wants to hear more specifically from him. Nicodemus says, "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." It's the "signs" Jesus has done that attract Nicodemus.

That comes as no big surprise since who's not impressed by miracles? Yet just before this story begins, John's gospel says that "many believed in (Jesus) because they saw the signs that he was doing, (b)ut Jesus, on his part, did not entrust himself to them" (2:23-24). For Jesus, Nicodemus shows with his first words that he's the sort of person whose interest in Jesus is suspect because he's focused on external "signs". Jesus will soon let him know that a true seeker needs to go much deeper than that.

For our part, we might soon feel a bit sorry for Nicodemus. He comes impressed by the signs Jesus has done and wants to hear more from the one who's done them. Yet he also comes as no slouch himself in the religious leadership department. He's a member of his people's most powerful and prestigious religious body. He's tried to show Jesus proper respect by calling him "Rabbi" and has taken the initiative to start this conversation with a wandering Galilean preacher. So, in return, shouldn't he be able to expect at least some recognition of his own significant religious stature?

"Nicodemus, thank you for seeking me out! I'm so thrilled that as member of the Sanhedrin you have any interest in me at all. A Galilean preacher like me might dream of such a thing, but never expect it to really happen. Yet here you are! Thank you so much!"

That's NOT how Jesus responds to him. He doesn't offer Nicodemus even one soft toss of a polite religious compliment. Instead, he fires a hard and sinking fastball at him, one that explodes with spiritual challenge. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Jesus' pitch is in the catcher's mitt before Nicodemus can even get the bat off his shoulder.

But it's important to realize that Jesus isn't competing with Nicodemus. He just wants him to know that their time together can't remain at a comfortable surface. If Nicodemus really wants to ask Jesus about God, he'll have to be willing to go deep. Jesus won't give him simple or easy answers about the Kingdom of God because the Kingdom's not a simple or easy matter. It's full of genuine mystery.

"No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." So what *does* Jesus mean by that? For his part, Nicodemus probably can't believe that Jesus is serious about it. Remember that Nicodemus is a leading Pharisee, a man who stands at the pinnacle of his Jewish faith and tradition. He's come to Jesus thinking that all he needs is a little bit of help, a small dose of extra spiritual insight and everything will fall into place for him. But then Jesus comes at him with this talk about needing to be "born from above". Jesus can't be serious about that, can he?

The Greek word Jesus uses with Nicodemus can be translated either as "born from above" or "born again". Jesus probably intends both meanings, but his main challenge to Nicodemus is that he has to get ready to get over himself. If Nicodemus really wants to go deeper into God with Jesus he won't be able to cling to his current religious status, ideas, or achievements. He'll have to start over again. It's not what Nicodemus expects, and it's not what he wants to hear.

So he comes back at Jesus, asking, "Well, now come on. How can a man enter again into his mother's womb?" Nicodemus knows Jesus has been speaking metaphorically, but still he's dumbfounded about why and how a man like him- a lifelong member of God's chosen people, a high-ranking figure in the Jewish religious elite, a seriously devout and learned man who must already know a lot about God- why should he have to start over?

Jesus doesn't back off. He only works to draw Nicodemus deeper into the mystery of God's reign. He says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and of the Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:5-6). Say what?

Talk like that is plenty strange to our 21st century American ears, but at least it rings a few familiar bells for Nicodemus. It calls to mind for him, as a student of his people's Scriptures, the prophet Ezekiel's telling of a time when God would sprinkle his people with clean water, of a time when their hearts of stone would be turned into hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:25-26). It probably also reminds him of the baptism John the Baptist has been offering, a baptism of repentance that Nicodemus has likely avoided because he's figured it's meant for sinners, not for righteous Pharisees like him.

Nicodemus and his fellow Pharisees are not at all ignorant about the religious meanings water can have. In fact, they frequently engage in ceremonial washings that they intend as a sign of their own inward cleansing. But Jesus' point is that water, even when of baptism or of a ceremonial washing, is still only an external sign. Only when God's Spirit goes much deeper to bathe our hearts with God's own cleansing power, only then, says Jesus, can we be "born again" or "born from above".

Jesus deepens the level of mystery even further by emphasizing the impossibility of all this from a human point of view. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

By this, Jesus means that there's no natural progression from our present life in the flesh to the life in the Spirit that God intends for us. There is no surefire process we can follow that will automatically take us from who we are now to who God ultimately means for us to be. It's something we can never accomplish on our own whether through gaining the right theological knowledge or practicing the correct spiritual disciplines or belonging to the one, true religion. It's something only the Spirit of God can do.

"Yes, Nicodemus," Jesus says, "only God's Spirit can do for you what you need to have done and be assured that the Spirit is never in your control. The Spirit is like the wind, blowing where

it will. You didn't control the first time you were born and you won't control your spiritual rebirth, either. It will come to you only as a free gift from God's free Spirit.

I imagine this shakes up Nicodemus in a big way because he is a man of accomplishment. He's a man who's accustomed to doing for himself. To Jesus' insistence that he must be radically dependent upon the free Spirit of God, all Nicodemus can do is stutter, "How can this be?"

Jesus' words, I think, have to disturb us, too. After all, how many of us like to be in control? How many of us like to be able to do for ourselves what we need to have done? How many of us, like Nicodemus, want to rely on our status, our knowledge, and our deeds to establish our worth and to count for the most in the end?

The confounding truth remains, however, that when we're at the end of our rope and beyond our knowledge, when we're stuck in the pit of our wrongdoing and the rubble of our helplessness, *that's* when we most open up to the mystery of God's kingdom. That's when we're able truly to go deep and fall up into the loving arms of God, fall up at last into the freshening winds of Spirit. Being born from above never comes about because of our great reputations or special expertise or superior achievements. The labor room for our new birth always is the place of our complete helplessness and need, and that's where Jesus tries to bring Nicodemus and us.

He doesn't stop there. He goes deeper still to unfold more mystery, more of how we fall up into God's amazing love, more of how the Spirit's wind blows so that we can be "born again". Jesus talks about this in a way that seems especially odd and impenetrable at first. He says, "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 whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (v. 13-15).

The key to these strange verses lies in understanding the meaning of Jesus' descent and ascent. Jesus first comes down to be one of us. His descent from heaven makes possible his and our later ascent. But the meaning of his ascension is very different from what we usually think. It begins at a place we don't expect and that we don't like.

Jesus first points to it by referring to an old story from the book of Numbers (21:4-9). It's about a snake in the wilderness and it's a story Nicodemus certainly remembers. In it, the Israelites wandering in the desert once again rebel against God. God sends a plague of poisonous snakes to punish them and many people are bitten, fall sick, and die. Moses intercedes with God on Israel's behalf and God relents. In mercy, God tells Moses to do take one of the poisonous snakes and cast it in bronze. He's then to lift it up high on a pole for everyone to see. Anyone who looks upon the snake is healed so that the source of the malady becomes its cure. The means of God's judgment against the people becomes the instrument of God's salvation for them. It's a huge paradox and hard to understand.

Yet Jesus clearly connects his own mission to this. He says, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes on him will have eternal life." Jesus is talking about nothing other than his *cross*.

In John's gospel, he regularly speaks of being "lifted up" on it. "Lifted up" is the phrase the New Testament usually uses to mean "exalted". When Peter preaches on the first Pentecost about Jesus' ascension, he says that Jesus is "exalted to the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33). The Greek for "lifted up" in John, chapter 3, and for "exalted" in Peter's sermon are the same word.

In John's gospel, however, Jesus' ascension, his exaltation into glory, begins exactly on the cross. It begins with Jesus being nailed to it, with his being lifted up on it. Lifted onto the cross, Jesus is like the serpent Moses lifted up in the wilderness. Like that serpent, he's there because of human rebellion against God. Like it, he's there as a sign of God's judgment against that rebellion. Like it, he's there as the instrument of God's salvation for those who have rebelled.

Looking to him lifted up on the cross, we see God in our flesh coming down to suffer the consequences of our wrongdoing. Looking to him lifted up on the cross, we see God in our flesh coming down to absorb the just punishment for our sin, punishment we ourselves could never

bear. And looking to him lifted up on the cross, we see God in our flesh coming down with outstretched arms to lift us up in glorious and exalted love.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” Lifted up on the cross God in our flesh reaches down to write a love letter to us in blood. In the power of God’s free and Holy Spirit, God reaches down to do for us what we can never do for ourselves. God reaches down to go this deep for us in Jesus, so that at last we can let go of ourselves.

We can let go of every attempt to prove our own worth or secure our own destiny by virtue of our status, our knowledge, or our achievement. We can let go of all of these and instead go deep with Jesus into God. Going deep with Jesus, we can fall up once more into God’s holy and ever loving arms. In the fresh winds of the Spirit that blow there, we can be “born again”. Freed from ourselves, empty of ourselves, in recognizing our own sheer helplessness and need we become free for God. And free for God we are at last “born from above”. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We love You, O God. You’ve gone so deep for us, coming down to be one of us in Jesus. In him, You’ve entered the depths of our brokenness and sin and allowed Yourself to be lifted up onto the cross to suffer for us all the burden, judgment, and punishment of our rebellion. You’ve come to us in Christ Jesus not to condemn the world but to save it- save us by Your almighty love that comes to us in the awe-full mystery of Your cross.

We ask You to fill us with that same suffering and sacrificial love for each other, love that moves in all of our thinking and speaking, feeling and doing, love that springs from every hidden corner of our souls. We pray that it will be love for all of our neighbors near and far, for all of our friends old and new. We pray that it will be for all those crying out for love and healing, for all those wounded and hurting in body or soul, for whatever reason. We pray that it will be for all our families at home and for our sisters and brothers in the church. We pray that it be for all those we find hard to bear and for those who find it hard to bear with us. We pray, above all, that it will be love truly faithful to Your love, Your love that promises to defeat every form of death until at last Your life and love eternal reigns supreme.

We pray this in the name of Jesus and we pray for the coming of Your kingdom in the way that he has taught us, saying together, “Our Father, . . .” Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff