

From Above
(John 3:1-17)

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. So John tells us. He came in darkness, when no one could see—like a man sneaking out for drink or a teenager climbing out of a bedroom window and driving off for a forbidden tryst with the boy her parents don't even know exists. When preachers talk about this meeting, it seems like they always paint Nicodemus yellow. He is a man who doesn't have the guts to profess his faith in daylight where all the honest world can see him. When I look at Nicodemus, I see something quite different. Here is a man who had everything to lose and little to gain by going to Jesus. He was risking a lot, even in darkness, to have this meeting. So why does he do it? Because he is a seeker. He is looking to find the grace of God. Something of what he saw in Jesus spoke of a power beyond his experience. And so he goes by night to see if he can't find out what it is. "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."

If we take the Scriptures and our own experience seriously we know that God's presence is all around, everywhere. We know that God's love is a powerful. "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." We also ought to understand that we are not in control of God's presence and working. God's Spirit is like the wind. It blows wherever it wants. You can see the effect it has, you can hear it, you can feel it, but you don't know where it is coming from or where it is going to. Philip Yancey has written, "The Spirit is what we see with rather than what we see." God's Spirit becomes the light with which we see beyond what we can touch and feel. God's presence in this world can only be seen when the eyes of our hearts have been opened. God brings the dawning of that light. We cannot turn that light on by ourselves any more than we can make the sun rise or set.

I think that this is what Jesus was trying to tell Nicodemus. "Nicodemus, you cannot see the presence of God until you have been born from above." Now the word in Greek that is translated "from above" can also be translated "again". The same Greek word, *anōthen*, can mean born "from above" or born "again". This is what I believe Jesus meant to communicate to Nicodemus, "Unless a person is born from above, he is not able to see the presence of God."—unless a person is born "from above." Jesus may have intended this meaning, but what Nicodemus heard was something quite different. Apparently what Nicodemus heard was this: "Unless a person is born again, he is not able to see the presence of God." Jesus said "born from above." Nicodemus heard "born again." The gospel writer uses this play on the meaning of the Greek word to poke fun at Nicodemus, and ever since then preachers have been having fun at Nicodemus' expense. In his book *Peculiar Treasures*: Frederick Buechner puts this reply in Nicodemus' mouth. Nicodemus thinks Jesus is saying, "Unless a person is born again, he cannot see the presence of God," and so Nicodemus replies, "Just how are you supposed to pull a thing like that off when you are pushing sixty-five? How did you get born again when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning? Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb when it

was all that he could do to enter a taxi without the driver coming around to give him a shove from behind?" (p. 122).

We don't know whether Nicodemus was finally born "from above" or not? His is one of those open-ended New Testament stories, like the story of the Prodigal son's older brother. Did he ever put aside his resentment to come in and join the party or not. We'll never know, because the scriptures don't tell us. We never see the older brother again, but we do see Nicodemus again. Two more times in the Gospel of John Nicodemus is mentioned by name. The first time comes when a crowd is agitating for Jesus to be arrested. Nicodemus jumps up to speak in his defense. "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" Later, after Jesus has been crucified and his body taken down from the cross, Nicodemus goes with Joseph of Arimathea to put Jesus in a tomb. Nicodemus brings spices to anoint Jesus body. Something tells me his interest in Jesus was more like faith than not.

It is unfortunate, I believe, that this passage from John has been used to separate the world into saved and lost, born again and unborn. Reality is seldom that clear. For some, the day that God became real to them is as clear as night and day. They can mark on the calendar the day they were "born again". Some even celebrate this day each year just as they do their physical birthday. John Wesley and Charles Colson are two for whom the experience of faith was so dramatic that it literally turned their lives around. And both of them have done things that have touched the lives of millions of people. Then there are folks like me. I grew up in the warmth of a Christian family. I can't count on my fingers the good memories of care and nurture and faith that I have had in the church. There have, however, been times when certain experiences have redirected my path in life. If I were to dig up an old calendar, I could mark out the eight days in 1966 that I attended the New Wilmington Missionary Conference. That experience is the reason I am in ministry now. Well, the conference is not the reason, God is the reason, and through that conference God directed my life and pointed me down a path that has brought me to where and who I am today. Since then there have been significant times, significant books, significant people who have helped me in personal life and in understanding what I am supposed to be doing in ministry. Rev. Judy Gay, an Episcopal minister in Cambridge, Massachusetts tells of a friend who was asked about his "born again" status. "Born again?" he exclaimed, "I am being born again and again and again. Just once will never be enough for me!" It reminds me of my professor, Dow Edgerton, who was asked whether the experience of being moved to tears in worship was something he would like to have happen again. "Yes, every time!" Maybe altar calls every Sunday aren't such a bad idea after all, as long as we understand that it is not a call to be converted, but an asking for God's tangible grace.

Nicodemus and "doubting Thomas" are two people who keep on getting a bad rap. They deserve more respect than many are willing to give them. Rev. Judy Gay has called Nicodemus the patron saint of seekers. There are many, many people in our world like Nicodemus. They are looking for the presence of God but are unsure about the church. They are "uncertain what this Jesus stuff is really about, afraid to leave [their] old familiar ways, unsure if [they] want to get too involved in the church, struggling to cope with sickness and unemployment and family conflicts and deaths, and to hold on to the faith, or to find a faith to keep [them] going." I think that many Christians share some of the same questions and doubts that Nicodemus had. Unlike

those who can say without a doubt that iron floated, that it was a real whale that swallowed Jonah and that no word in the Bible contradicts any other, they have come face to face with things that challenge faith. Barbara Brown Taylor compares her faith to that inner music that allows her to hear the right pitch for the musical note E. She can tune her pipe up and down, and as she does so something inside tells her when the note is on pitch. Her joy and faith in Christ is like that. It sings out even when things in the world are out of tune. "After long years of seeking certainty about things that cannot be seen," she says, "I have pretty much surrendered to the necessity of faith: that love will last, that goodness has power, that God is real." And yet, "There are whole months, in fact, when both faith and music seem like impossible luxuries. What kind of music can a child from Sierra Leone make, with raw stumps where her hands once were? Would anyone like to address the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the power of goodness?"

The United States is a strange mix of people. Twenty percent more or less attend church weekly. Forty percent say they do. Over eighty percent profess faith in God. And yet we are at the same time a very materialistic and secular society. For some faith is as certain as coffee in the morning. They know what things are wrong and who is going to heaven, and they can't wait to share that insight with you. Others look down their noses at faith. In their book it falls only a little bit short of superstition, and they can't understand how any educated person could believe in God. In between those two extremes are people who are passionate, indifferent, skeptical and even hostile. Some are like the Nicodemus most of us have come to know—blind to anything but the material world, needing a birth from above to wake them up to the mystery of God's grace. Others sense that there is something out there that is more than they know so far, better than they know, a better basis for life, a better reason for living, but they have trouble accepting a smug over-certain faith in a loving and good God because it doesn't seem to fit with their experience of pain in the world and judgment in the church.

Jesus' message to us is that beyond what we can feel and see, God's grace is sure. Jesus' message is that God can and does open eyes and hearts to know that grace. The indifference of casual people and the hostility of bitter people cannot erase God's presence. Jesus' message is that not everyone is in a position to wear their faith in the daylight, like a badge of honor, and that seekers who come by night are more than welcome. Some will, of necessity, live like early Christians who draw symbols of fish in the dust to encourage one another and yet protect their families from harm. Like Joseph of Arimathea they will minister to Christ with a faith that is secret. For some that secret faith is more committed and costly than our open hymns on a Sunday morning in a country free from persecution. I hope that our congregation will always be a place where seekers like Nicodemus can come in the night of doubt or fear or skepticism and be welcomed. I hope that we not be like doors that block God's Spirit, but windows through which the Spirit can move, bringing faith and life.