

HEALING THE NICODEMUS IN ALL OF US.

John 3:1-17

The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach VA 23452

Please take a moment and imagine what today's gospel would be like presented on stage. The community that the gospel of John was written for would have known and understood Greek drama and this passage is perfect for that type of staging effect. Close your eyes if that helps and allow me to set the stage.

All is dark except for a single spot light shining on a solitary figure. A well-dressed man comes in from the darkness on stage right and walks towards the figure bathed in light. He says that he knows that the one in the light is special because he has seen the signs. He has made only that statement when the man in the light begins to speak. He challenges the figure in the dark and marvels that this wise and important man does not seem to understand. In many respects he dismisses him, not harshly but marveling that he doesn't understand. As he continues the lights begin to come up on the stage and you realize that there are more people here than just the two men. The room is full and Jesus is now teaching all of them. The light builds until Jesus says, "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." The scene ends in blazing lights as Jesus talks of those who believe as living in the light and those who do not believe as being afraid of the light.

Now that you have a visual image we can begin to look at this passage for this is the gospel of John and the writer of John is speaking in code and metaphor as he often does.

Some remarkable things leap out at first: a name and a specific time of day. By naming Nicodemus, that is a hint that he was a real person. Someone who was probably a great teacher, so great that those reading John's Gospel 70 years after Christ was crucified, might have known him. Some like to think he is sneaking out at night to find Jesus because he was afraid of what the others might think. The more likely explanation is that this is symbolic and therefore this action is important. Nicodemus comes at night, in other words he is coming out of the darkness into the presence of Jesus, the light. Remember in the prologue of John the darkness cannot overcome the light. So Nicodemus has now entered into the presence of the light and begins to speak, but he has not yet come fully into the light. He acknowledges that he is there because of the signs that he has seen. This passage is all about light as a symbol for Jesus and Truth. The passage continues after our gospel selection ends and Jesus refers to the light coming into the world 5 times in as many verses.

Nicodemus is seeking knowledge, but as was typical of the Pharisees, he was coming with a particular mindset. It is always dangerous to approach God with a closed mind or preconceived notions and if you take nothing else away from today's sermon, please remember that. A great deal of trouble in today's church stems from approaching God with a closed mind.

Nicodemus has not read the Prologue of John and is not aware of what we carry in our minds as we approach this passage. The problem is that Nicodemus is operating as a linear thinker in a linear world and Jesus is trying to introduce another realm, another plane of existence if you will. One commentary said that Nicodemus is living in a horizontal plane and Jesus is intersecting his horizontal plane with a vertical plane.

This is where physics and religion intersect if you will. We live in a three dimensional world. Physicists speak of the stunning shock to our senses if something from a fourth dimension suddenly appeared in our world. We would not know what to make of it. This is what I suspect Nicodemus was experiencing in his encounter with Jesus.

Jesus is trying to explain that which is beyond Nicodemus' and our experience in the teaching that is to come. So as the lights come up in my staging the others begin to appear, Jesus ceases speaking just to Nicodemus and begins to speak to all. By the way, that is one of the things we loose in our English translation. In the original Greek Jesus moves from the first person to the second person plural that we do not have any longer. Well we do here in Virginia, but I just don't hear Jesus saying Very truly I tell y'all we speak of the truth that we know. But that is how the Greek reads.

The truly important teaching is about the concept not of being born again, but of being born from above. This is a birth of and by the Spirit that Nicodemus and we are being invited to enter into.

During our Thursday lunch bible study I read them the Message translation and this gives the passage a very different feel.

You're not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation, the wind hovering over the water creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life, it's not possible to enter God's Kingdom. When you look at a baby, its' just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can't see and touch, the Spirit, and becomes a living spirit....You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling though the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone born from above by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.

This unseen but experienced phenomenon is the in-breaking of the Spirit into the world of those gathered at Jesus' feet. Walking the dogs the other day I could see and feel evidence of wind. We cannot see wind, yet we know that the wind exists. So it is with the Spirit. We can point to the signs of the Spirit. We can experience the work, the effects of the Spirit, but we never see the Spirit.

Nicodemus had a hint of who Christ was because he had seen the signs. He was not however prepared to meet him in this wild encounter of intersecting worlds of earthly and heavenly kingdoms. His mind and heart were not open enough to really experience the depth and breadth of these signs. Nicodemus serves not as a specific person, but as a metaphor for all of us. You see we all carry a Nicodemus inside of us. Some of us may even be more comfortable living as Nicodemus, but Nicodemus was lost. He was trying to come in from the darkness, but we will

never know if he ever really made it and that is not what is important. What is important is that we need to know the Nicodemus inside of each of us and help bring that Nicodemus into the light. To sit with the disciples on the stage in the light that Christ brought into the world rather than hang back in the wings. To notice the signs of the incredible in-breaking of the Holy Spirit into our plane of existence.

Lent, is one of those times when we are encouraged to take notice of this intersection. As we proceed through Lent, take the time and make the effort to notice. Take the time to notice the signs of the Spirit as they intersect your life. They are there, all around you, but only if you open your eyes and your heart to their power. Step away from those pre-conceived notions and notice the Spirit and then allow the Nicodemus in you to walk into and then stay in the light.