

Psalm 29  
John 3:1-17

Trinity Sunday  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
May 27, 2018

## **He Came By Night**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Our psalm today is a hymn of praise, celebrating the awesome power of God, seen here in a great storm. Listen to these words from Psalm 29...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

Our Gospel Lesson on this Trinity Sunday is about Jesus and a conversation he had one evening with Nicodemus. But Jesus makes reference to the Spirit, in particular our being born of the Spirit. And it was God who out of his love sent the Son into the world, that we might believe and know eternal life. Listen to these words from John 3:1-17...

### *Sermon*

In our Gospel Lesson today we overhear Jesus tell a religious leader that the abundant and eternal life is a gift from God, a gift from above; it is not attained by achievement, claim, or proof.

In a verse that immediately precede this third chapter of John we read:

When he [Jesus] was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. (John 2:23)

Our text is a case in point, because in chapter 3, verse 2, Nicodemus says to Jesus:

“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.”

Apparently impressed by the signs that Jesus has done, Nicodemus—a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews—Nicodemus seeks out a private meeting with Jesus.

In some ways the Pharisees were the best people in the whole of Israel. Their number was never more than 6,000 strong. It was a brotherhood into which men entered by pledging themselves to spend their lives obeying the scribal law in every detail.

We know that to the Jew the law was most sacred. Initially it constituted the first five books of the Old Testament—The Pentateuch. There in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, great and noble precepts were laid down for the living of life. There, were the Ten Commandments. But this was not enough for some later Jews. And they set about to extract from these great principles an infinite number of detailed rules and regulations to govern every possible action a person might take. Kind of like the 74,608-page IRS code today, 187 times longer than it was a century ago.

We see an example of this extraction by the laws that grew up governing observance of the Sabbath. The Fourth Commandment says that we are to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy and we are not to work. Well, later Jews set about to define what was meant by work, and they ended up with rules such as this: To tie a knot on the Sabbath was to work and thus break the Sabbath law. But then a knot had to be defined. And it was done in this way:

The following are the knots the making of which renders a man guilty: the knot of camel drivers and that of sailors; and as one is guilty by reason of tying them, so also of untying them.

But on the other hand, knots which could be tied with one hand were permissible.

That was the kind of thing with which the Pharisees were concerned. This precise interpretation and keeping of the detail of the law was for them all-important. It was largely what religion meant to them. And they sincerely believed they were serving and pleasing God.

It was the scribes who decided upon the rules and regulations, and it was the Pharisees who dedicated themselves to keeping them. And Nicodemus was a Pharisee. And yet, Nicodemus was searching for something more, hoping Jesus might have some answers.

Furthermore, John also tells us that Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews. This meant that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, a court of seventy members which functioned as the supreme court of the Jewish people. While their power was somewhat limited under Rome, it was still influential. In particular, the Sanhedrin had jurisdiction over religious matters. And one of their responsibilities was to deal with anyone accused of being a false prophet—an accusation that would be directed at Jesus.

And according to William Barclay, Nicodemus was a person of considerable wealth. For in the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of John we learn that when Jesus died, Nicodemus brought for his body “a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds.” (v. 39b) Thereby did he pay the last loving rites for the body of Christ, when the body of an executed man was regarded as a sheer pollution. Also, in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of John we find Nicodemus standing up for Jesus when he was threatened by the chief priests and the Pharisees. (vv. 45-52)

But here in John 3, Nicodemus seeks out a conversation with Jesus. And John says that he came to Jesus by night, perhaps afraid of what his peers would say. Thus we are alerted to a private conversation, shrouded in mystery and misunderstanding.

The discussion begins in a manner predictable between two teachers. 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.”(v. 2b)

But then Jesus proceeds to challenge him:

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. (v. 3)

Jesus uses the Greek word , ἀνωθεν (an’ ō then), which can have two meanings—born from above, or born again. Well, Nicodemus is confused. He thinks Jesus is talking about entering the mother’s womb and being physically born again. But, of course, the new birth of which Jesus speaks isn’t a physical rebirth, but a spiritual rebirth, a birth “from above.”

Jesus answers:

“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.” (vv. 5-6)

At this point the private conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus becomes a sermon, for at verse 7 the “You” is plural.

“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?”

What Jesus knew, that Nicodemus did not, was that a new person was needed for the new life of the kingdom of God. A new life that involved not just New Year’s resolutions, but wholly new, created in a new way—from above—born anew.

This was *not* the orientation of Nicodemus. His life was built around a right-keeping of the law. And yet, it was not altogether foreign; he could even have found reference to it in his own scriptures. Ezekiel told his people that they could not live the life that God had called them to with that stony heart, cold and callous, impervious to divine guidance and blessing. But God can make you a new person, with a quite different nature and a heart of flesh, warm and sensitive, shrinking from evil as from intolerable pain. A person who feels the hurt of others and is responsive to God’s touch. As the psalmist, aware of his sin, and of what he had become, prayed:

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. (51:10)

Then shall I lead a different kind of life. Such scriptures must have been familiar to the Pharisee, Nicodemus.

“Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand?” (v. 10)

Many have stumbled, not so much over the idea of the need for new birth, as it just being unrealistic. People get old; they lose heart; the fight seems over; life seems fixed. Once everything seemed possible, but perhaps the way became steep and tiring. Easier paths were chosen. And now the opportunity is gone forever. There is no turning back to live things over again, and this time better. What is done is done. Slowly, unconsciously, stone by stone, act by act, thought by thought, we have built a personality, a life, a story. And now we seem fixed in it, as the sidewalk in concrete. As the saying goes, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.”

A preacher once said that the Christ who healed the sick and cleansed the lepers, and raised the dead, never once made an old man young again. How can a man be born when he is old?

But the whole point of the gospel is that God can make of us —any of us—a new creation. Not long ago a woman was talking with me in a business situation and for some reason began to tell me her story. She spoke of abuse as a young person. She told of how she grew up with an alcoholic father. But at age 60, through a miraculous act of God, this father completely changed, never to drink again. The wind comes, who knows how, cleansing, invigorating, renewing, and then—it is gone. So does God break in—who can determine or calculate where, who can tell when or how?

Remember when God called Abraham and told him to leave home, and made a promise to him—Abraham just obeyed. As we read in Genesis 12:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you”...So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (Gen. 12:1, 4)

So Abraham represents those pilgrims of the kingdom who live by faith. At whatever age, willing to follow where God leads.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. (Heb. 11:8)

But here in John 3 Nicodemus represents those who seek to line up sufficient proofs and arguments so as to arrive at a clear conclusion and thus believe or not believe. For them, faith comes through weighing the evidence and drawing conclusions. The conclusions involve no leap of faith, no risk, no cost, no vulnerability.

Abraham on the other hand represents those who insist that life in the Kingdom of God is a gift from above, from God. What he's done for others, he can do for you. It is unearned, and unachieved. It is uncalculated, unchartered, and uncontrolled. We cannot control the work of the Holy Spirit, whose works and ways are beyond our understanding. It is as mysterious as the wind. The wind which

“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 my friends, let us trust and obey, and let us ever receive the promise of God's gift of new life. Even if we're as old as Abraham. Even if we're as cautious as Nicodemus.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.