

Moved by the Spirit: God Beyond, God Among, God Within

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

John 3:1-17 ~ Trinity Sunday ~ May 30, 2021

Do you suppose Nicodemus had any idea what he would see or hear when he came out into the darkness to find Jesus? It is no accident that he came, no casual stroll. He planned this and came looking. He really had no choice. But could he know where this encounter would lead?

I suggest to you that in this passage we see a person on the brink of a major transition in his life. I suggest to you also that the threshold for transition in our own lives is always very close at hand. And finally, I suggest to you that transition – letting go of the known and moving into the unknown – arises through the incoming of the Holy Spirit.

It's a delicious detail that this meeting took place when it was dark: "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night...." I know; he was a religious leader, so this was a risky undertaking; it could mar his fine reputation; that's why he sought Jesus at night. But things are different when it is dark. It is different to go out and meet someone at night. Something unexpected, unseen, sometimes happens. Shadows are different. Things which were visible become invisible. And that which was invisible is suddenly startlingly clear.

Now John – who is reporting this story – does not understand salvation as something way out beyond. Salvation is right here, next to us; now. Each moment, both mundane and sacred. Salvation is ever within reach. Yet, because of the shadows, the light and dark, the distractions and the busy blindness of our lives, it is difficult to see, to live into.

What prompts one of us to undertake a major change? Something within, something without. Sometimes premeditated, sometimes accidental. Many people I know are doing some major reassessing of their lives right now – their priorities and relationships; how they use their time. In a recent survey, 83% of CEO's said they want to see their employees back in the office. Only 10% of the employees are eager to return. I can't wait to see how this plays out!

Something inspired Nicodemus to come out and search. He speaks of signs that Jesus had done, signs that suggest to him a "teacher come from God." Something he felt or heard or saw gave him pause. Who knows, he may have been quite content, when this rabbi Jesus happened through town. He probably resisted his initial desire to meet with such a troublemaker. Yet there was something too alluring, compelling, that drew him out to seek... he knew not what.

This is the pull – the irresistible attraction – of grace, the yearning both of discontent and of desire, the "high hope of adventure." The search, the bewilderment, the proximity. Nicodemus is a person with questions, in the presence of God. Nicodemus's story is my story, and yours. What is drawing you forth along this way?

We may experience God in three ways: as the sacred beyond us – creator, giver of life, eternal judge; we experience God as the sacred among us – in one another, as Christ, through compassion, mercy, or healing; and as the sacred within us – as longing, searching, resting. This is the essence of the Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit affirms that the mystery beyond, among, and within us are all part of the same movement, something of a holy conversation, a holy dance. (Buechner & Willimon)

While the journey of faith is unique for each person, those who have gone before have observed common landmarks, recognizable patterns. One such pattern is the recognition that the spiritual path is not a linear progression with beginning, middle, and end. Rather, the way is circular. We come back around to places where we have been before. We do not go through a season of doubt just once, or a season of seeking and exploration, nor do we go through seasons of great attentiveness and faithfulness just once. Rather, we come into these places, are there for a time, move on, and may find ourselves returning years or even decades later.

Those who journey in faith recognize truth in the words from T.S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding":

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

I see this circuitous pattern in my own life, with times when I have felt too confined, things seemed too predictable and orderly; that I'm just going through the paces. Giving rise to a need to bust out, leave the familiar, seek the unknown. Followed in due season, by a deep sense that it is time to return home, time to put things in order.

This is consistent with one of the other hallmarks in the journey. We are drawn quite paradoxically in two directions: for there are times when it feels important for us to know – for sure; to apprehend. We want to know that God loves us; to know what is the right so that we may do the right; we want to know the path so we may follow it. Yet, at other times, we are drawn toward the unknown and the unknowable; for it is the mystery of God, the mystery of love, which is full of richness, promise, and allure. We want to give ourselves wholly, fully; to be subsumed in the holiness of life.

Many years ago, when I was in transition from one chapter to the next, a friend mentioned that she had a gift for reading Tarot cards. I was looking everywhere and anywhere for insight, so I had my fortune read. I don't remember most of it, but I remember that by some calculation using my birth-date, two cards in the deck were assigned as "my" cards. These were the emperor and the fool. As you might imagine, the emperor sits resplendent and wise in power on a throne. The fool, on the other hand, is depicted as a young lad, wandering, with eyes on the sky and stars above, not noticing that he is about to step off the edge of a precipice that leads... who knows where.

Major transitions, new configurations in our relationships, quests of spiritual exploring; all evoke this sense of being both emperor and fool. Some part of us knows deeply, truly; while some other part is ready just to leap. On the edge of newness, I might do as Nicodemus did, sneak out in the dark of night to ask questions of one who seems to know.

We may not understand what we hear: "Be born anew? How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb?" The encounter does not conclude with evident clarity; he is left wondering, "How can this be?" Yet Nicodemus is ready, receptive. Jesus affirms, 'the wind is blowing in a new direction and it has caught you up; you shall be born anew.'

Flesh begets flesh, says Christ. Stay where you are, and you will surely produce more of the same, perpetuate the same. Therefore, live not in the flesh but in the Spirit, and you will be blown to new places.

So, is it time? Time to take a step? Respond to the beckoning? To sneak away in the dead of night, to seek a sage, or the sage-liness of the depths of your own soul...? You may already sense what it is that you must do, to free yourself once more of those inevitable trappings of the flesh – born of our anxiety and neediness – to receive freely the winds of the spirit. The wind blows where it chooses; you hear the sound of it; you know not where it comes from, nor where it goes. But it is the Spirit of God. Thus, we are called. Thus, we are sent. Thus, let us live.