

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Second Sunday in Lent/March 12, 2017

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“For the Law brings wrath,” Paul says. Don’t be caught stepping out of bounds; talking with someone whose view is not in accord with the group to which you identify. Keep yourself pure. Don’t be tainted with outside associations. So I imagine Nicodemus saying to himself, “I better come to Jesus at night when no one can see me.” That is certainly one way of living. It has a judgmental quality to it. It is not the way of grace.

Nicodemus is looking for that different way. I like to reverse the phrasing of the gospel and say that it was by night that Nicodemus came to Jesus. In the dark of night fixed boundaries soften. The unexpected can come up on us. We brush up against uncertainty. There is a poem by Rainer Rilke called “Evening” that expresses what happens when nighttime falls. You watch,

“while the fading view
wavers between heaven and earth
and leaves you not quite part of either...”

The night is when we let go of absolutism and fixed identity. The Lord says to Abram, “Go.” Leave those connections that satisfy your need for certainty – your country, your clan, your kin. “Go” says the Lord, and we can imagine the fading view with Abram wavering between his former land and the promise ahead, not quite part of either. It is what happens when nighttime falls. Later God would take Abram out under the stars and promise him descendants as numerous as these. It is there that Abram “believed the Lord,” and as Paul said, “it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

We find ourselves like Nicodemus constrained by expectations, and something doesn’t quite sit right with us. Our political parties are expected not to compromise, to show no quarter one to the other. And divisions yawn

between us. Whatever ethnic group we are a part of, it seems that one doesn't trust the other, doesn't understand the other, and sometimes finds the other fearful. Last month over one hundred Jewish tombstones were knocked over in Mt. Carmel Cemetery. This happened less than a week after the same painful affront took place in St. Louis. Muslims who face their own fears of being considered outsiders raised over \$130,000 to help repair the Jewish cemetery. My friend Rafiq's Ahmadiyya Muslim Community helped in the clean-up of the Mount Carmel Cemetery. Parishioners have brought in "No Place for Hate" signs to indicate that Saint Paul's is an open community. Pew Research indicates that 62% of Americans don't know a Muslim and 39% don't know a Jew. This allows for fixed boundaries the crossing of which brings wrath as Paul would say. The divides become a chasm in the harsh light of group identity. We need the softened lines of night – when Nicodemus ill at ease with insiders and outsiders journeyed to Jesus; when Abram told to go from the certainty of kin wandered out under the stars to behold a promised future.

When we leave behind former certainties and prejudices, when we cross boundaries to meet the other, it is possible to become a bit unhinged. The metaphorical night that softens the dividing lines can be scary. How do we bear the anxiety of leaving that of which we were once so sure? When we are uprooted and unfixed, we are not unwatched. Abram is uprooted. "Go," God says. But he is watched over and so are we. The Psalm says twice, "The Lord himself watches over you.... Watches over your going out and your coming in." When we are anxious we are not alone. God walks with us. There is a prayer that we say to conclude every nightly vestry meeting. The vestry is the church's management board. We pray: "Lord, it is night....The night is dark. Let our fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives rest in you." When our hearts are restless, we find solace in God. When we have ventured far from past certainties, we learn to lean on the one we can count on beyond all else. Boundaries at night may soften and become unclear, but grace does not. The grace of new life, of a promised future when our past is no longer tenable, is guaranteed to all. Trust it, Paul says. When the way forward has become dark and is unclear we surrender ourselves entirely to the guidance of God. This is why the Christian faith is often called the Way.

We listen for God's Word. It might say "Go" as it did for Abram. It might lead us to seek Jesus as it did Nicodemus. But in each case it implies looking away from self. Once we have left smug self-assurance behind, once we have left what we think is owed to us behind, there is really nothing to boast about as Paul discovered. We are born of flesh Jesus said. Flesh emphasizes our weakness and mortality. We are attached to our group identity, our certainties, our sharp distinctions, so much so that we can't see past them to opportunities for new beginnings, for new life. The old beginning of our life is self-absorption. And like water we can't rise above our source. There's not much to boast about, which is what Paul is trying to say when he uses the term "ungodly." We need a new beginning, a new source. Instead of flesh, Jesus says, be born of Spirit. God is able to bring into existence what does not yet exist. God is able to make us new. We need to be born from above, says Jesus, above our divisions and false certainties. We need to be born of Spirit. The Spirit searches out and unifies.

The birth-giving power of the Spirit is like the wind, Jesus taught. For him the wind was mysterious. It is unseen. The Sioux tribe in the Dakotas has a similar experience of the wind's mystery. They call themselves people of the wind which whips across the prairie. The wind has such an impact that when a child is born, they say, the little fingerprints swirl in the direction that the wind was blowing on that day. Spirit, wind, and birth seem to find a natural connection in our human imagination. They help us to understand what it means to be born from above. We are marked from above. It is the powerful, mysterious source of new life.

So when we feel ourselves stuck in place, when we distrust those we don't know, when divisions yawn between us, when our life is self-absorbed and we need a new beginning, don't wait for certainties. The wind of new life is blowing. It will mark your hands. It will mark you as Christ's own forever, as we say at baptism. Go out and stand before the powerful, unseen Spirit. Let its breath refresh you and make you new. Trust yourself to it.

It is night. In the darkness the dividing lines soften. We become less sure of ourselves. We seek the truth that like a star is flaring out there beyond. In our seeking we, like Nicodemus, come to Jesus who embodies God's

compassion. God so loved the world that God gave us his Son. Jesus says you can't see the kingdom of God, that is the mending of creation, the healing of division, without being born from above. Whatever promotes love, joy, and peace among people has its source in divine love. Let the source of your life be God's compassion. It will make you new. Set your face in the midst of the Spirit's refreshing wind. Don't worry about what will happen, about what others might say, God is watching and you will never be alone.

Amen.