

Sermon on John 3:1-17
St. Andrew Presbyterian—March 5, 2023

I have a sermon title in mind,
but never mind that.
Let's make this "Name That Sermon" Sunday.
Whoever comes up with the best title for this sermon,
gets...hmmm....
the satisfaction of knowing that they came up
with a good sermon title!

So, let's jump in!

Most of us have heard some version
of Abbott and Costello's legendary routine,
"Who's on First?"

"I want you to tell me the names of the fellows
on the St. Louis team," says Costello.
Abbott says,
*"I'm telling you,
Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third.*
"You know the fellows' names?
"Yes.
"Well, then, who's playin' first?
"Yes.
"I mean the fellow's name on first base.
"Who.
"The fellow playin' first base for St. Louis.
"Who.
"The guy on first base.
"Who is on first.
"Well, what are you asking *me* for?"

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus
sort reminds me of "Who's on First?"
Jesus and Nicodemus never seem to connect.
Nicodemus makes a polite and astute observation:
"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher
who has come from God."
And without even acknowledging what Nicodemus has said,
Jesus makes the statement that
"no one can see the kingdom of God
without being born from above."
Costello—I mean Nicodemus—

misunderstands
and thinks that Jesus is talking about
crawling back into the womb.

And off they go.

The last thing Nicodemus says is,
"How can these things be?"

Can't you just see him rolling his eyes
and scratching his head?

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus
is very frustrating
to follow.

And the reason it is frustrating
is that Jesus and Nicodemus
are each coming at God
from wildly different perspectives.

Nicodemus wants answers about God
that are clear and easy to understand.

He wants a kind of "how to" manual
for connecting with God.

And Jesus is telling him
that it's just not that simple.

You may remember the bumper sticker
that was popular a several years ago:

"The Bible said it.
I believe it.
That settles it."

William Willimon, on whom I have relied for many ideas in this sermon,
observes that
if you get your theology off bumper stickers,
this story about Jesus and Nicodemus may not be for you.
("How Can This Be?"

www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=60&print=true)

Let's look at the story again,
and see if you don't agree.

Nicodemus comes to see Jesus "at night."
Many sermons have been preached
about what it means that Nicodemus comes
at night.

Here's my brief thought:

I think that the night
is a symbol for something like
the dark night of Nicodemus' soul.

He is asking the kinds of questions
that we sometimes ask
when we lie awake at night unable to sleep.

Why was I born?
 Where do I belong?
 How can I be at peace?

And maybe that's why Nicodemus
 comes to Jesus.

But Nicodemus is an important fellow.
 He's a leader among the Pharisees.
 We often want to

beat up on the Pharisees.
 We often imagine that Pharisees
 were just a bunch narrow-minded rule counters
 who hated Jesus.

But the Pharisees were deeply faithful people,
 who cared immensely about
 doing the right thing.

Nicodemus is leader among
 those respectable people.

Think judge
 in the state Supreme Court.

That would be Nicodemus.

A fellow like Nicodemus
 needs to signal that he's
 a strong,
 self-confident
 kind of guy.

"Rabbi, we know..."

There are some people who know
 and some people who don't know.
 Nicodemus is "in the know."

"We all know—all of us smart people, that is....
 We all know that you must be divine."

And what Jesus says, basically, is
 "No sir, you don't know anything.
 And you won't know anything
 unless you are born from above."

Well, Nicodemus is still up in his head,
 trying to get all of this God business
 nailed down
 and under control
 so that he can understand it.

And so he hears what Jesus says
 in a sort of wooden-headed,
 literalistic way.

The phrase that Jesus uses—born from above—

But you can't predict it.
 You can't control it" (Willimon, *op. cit.*).
 But Nicodemus still
 has his nose down
 in his notebook.
 He's trying to get every detail down, step-by-step.
 So he just doesn't get it.
 "How can these things be?" he asks.
 W.H. Auden said that it's hard to be a Christian
 if you're not something of a poet.
 Born anew, born from above, wind, spirit....
 If you try to nail it all down,
 you miss it altogether.

That's so frustrating!
 We don't want God to be
 so wild,
 so uncontrollable!
 In fact, *we* would much rather
 be in control,
 thank you very much!
 Like Nicodemus,
 we would prefer a step-by-step manual,
 with the answers to life's questions
 neatly laid out before us.
 Do this.
 Then do this.
 Then everything's fine.
 In our culture, we've got answers
 and explanations
 for just about everything.
 We may not be too comfortable
 living with uncertainty and mystery.
 And so sometimes we work very hard
 to define who God is,
 and then we accept
 or reject that definition of God.
 We turn the Bible into
 some nailed down explanation
 for all of the mysteries of God.
 and then we beat each other over the heads
 with our nailed down explanations.
 Jesus' word to Nicodemus
 is Jesus' word to us.

God will not be controlled.
 God will not be numbered,
 or shrunk down to a manageable size,
 or put in a box.

"The wind blows where it chooses.
 You hear the sound of it,
 but you don't know
 where it comes from
 or where it goes."

When we really pay attention to Scripture,
 there is nothing in the Bible
 that shrinks God down to a manageable size
 so that we can fit God in our hip pockets.

For all of us who are like Nicodemus,
 for all of us who find ourselves scratching our heads sometimes
 because the notes we tried to take about God
 don't make any sense anymore,
 the good news is that
 no part of our salvation depends on our
 getting the right answers.

We don't have to get our faith
 all boxed up,
 tied down,
 numbered,
 and classified.

Hope comes from One
 who is above and beyond
 all of our classifications
 and understanding.

Healing is a gift from One
 who is far grander
 than our little minds can comprehend.
 There are no spiritual laws
 or answers to questions
 or anything we do
 that can give us hope.

Hope comes from the One
 who is bigger than we can imagine
 grander than we can dream...
 yet still, mysteriously, within and among us all.

Thanks be to God
 that we don't ever have to get
 all of the answers about God
 numbered and nailed down.

Thanks be to God
that the wind blows where it chooses,
that we hear the sound of it,
but we don't know where it comes from
or where it goes.

Thanks be to God for the mysteries of God.
Amen.