

**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](http://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—

is actually a very large phrase.  
 It can mean born anew,  
     or born from above...all kinds of things.  
 But the phrase that Nicodemus uses  
     is small phrase.  
 It only means "be born the second time,"  
     as if the whole movement of God's grace  
     can be numbered—  
     born the first time,  
     born the second time.  
 Despite what some of our politicians,  
     and evangelical preachers,  
     and media types would have us believe,  
 this story is not about being "born again"—  
     at least not in the sense that people most often  
     use that phrase.  
 This not about some lockstep  
     kind of conversion experience  
     that everybody must have  
     in order to be a "real Christian."  
 Jesus is talking about a movement of the Spirit  
     that can go on for a lifetime.  
 Jesus talks to Nicodemus about God  
     by using two of the most  
     uncontrollable,  
     uncontainable  
     human experiences—  
     birth and wind.  
 Willimon imagines Nicodemus asking,  
     with his pen poised ready to take notes,  
 "Teacher, when you use the word *wind*,  
     are you speaking  
     in the theological sense  
     of 'spirit'  
     or in the more ordinary sense  
     of 'wind'?"  
 And Jesus says,  
     "Oh my dear sophisticated friend,  
     please forget  
     the officially approved definitions.  
 The wind, the Spirit,  
     blows where it will.  
 You can hear it.  
     You can feel it.

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.