

March 8, 2020 - Lent 2A

“How Can These Things Be?” - © Rev. Seth Jones

Scripture: Gen 1-4a; Rom 4:1-5, 13-17; Jn 3:1-17

Nicodemus, a leader of the Jewish people, a teacher of the law, comes to Jesus at night with all kinds of concerns about who Jesus is. Jesus’ engagement with the community is just beginning, and a community leader comes to him. Nicodemus is interested in *who Jesus is* to the world. Nicodemus says,

*No one can do the signs you do apart from the presence of God.*

The Gospel of John is very concerned about reading the signs. John, in such a concern, is aligning himself with the Issacharites, one of the 12 tribes of Israel. The Issacharites were the tribe responsible for reading the signs of the times and knowing what to do in relationship to those signs. Our reading today shows that Nicodemus is having some trouble reading the signs of the day.

At one point, Nicodemus says,

*How can these things be?*

Jesus answers,

*Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?*

My Doctor of Ministry program is all about reading signs. It is the focus of the program. I am in the middle of my second semester. In a lot of ways, I identify with Nicodemus. I have two Master’s degrees, and am getting a Doctorate. I am, for all practical purposes, an equivalent to Nicodemus. And I have to tell you, after all this study, I understand even less now than I did 25 years ago when I graduated from United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities with a Master of Arts in Religious Studies.

If you, as faithful members of this congregation come to me and ask what Jesus means when he says, say,

*Only when you are born again from above will you see the Kingdom of God*

*I will tell you, I used to think I knew, but now I don’t really know at all. All I can tell you is that it is a statement about seeing, and seeing differently.*

*How, indeed, can these things be?*

In the midst of all the questions I have, and living with the deep sense that I know less than I did when I was younger, I should also make it clear that my faith is deeper now. I have a deeper faith but know even less about the meaning of what I believe. Am I a teacher of the faith and yet do not understand these things? Yeah, Jesus, I am a teacher of Christianity and I do not understand these things.

Imagine for a moment that you are hearing these words Jesus says to Nicodemus again for the first time. Wouldn't your questions be a lot like Nicodemus'?

*What do you mean, 'born again from above'? Like, how would that even work, Jesus? I can't, you know, go back to my mom and ask her to let me back in.*

There is no indication in this story, contrary to what you may have heard before, that Nicodemus is confused. Nor that Nicodemus is hiding from the Sanhedrin by coming to Jesus at night. Nor that being 'born again from above' has anything to do with baptism. It might, but Jesus doesn't say so here. Nor that Nicodemus is kind of dumb. Nicodemus does not come to Jesus to argue, nor is he here at night in bad faith. In fact, Nicodemus shows up twice more after this - during an argument with spiritual leaders about Jesus, and then at the Crucifixion to bury Jesus. He is deeply interested and sympathetic to everything Jesus is doing.

What Nicodemus is, also, is well-versed, well-trained, and well-educated in the tradition he shares with Jesus. It may be that John wants to make Jesus completely different from the tradition Jesus came out of; but I think it is more likely that Jesus is a massive and wild reformation of the faith he and Nicodemus are still a part of.

Judaism was going through a reformation, a reconstruction, by way of Jesus. Eventually, the child separated from the parent and became her very own thing - Christianity. Within Christianity, I have often wondered what a 3rd Reformation might look like. I used to ask this quite a bit, until someone pointed out to me that the version of Christianity that is the most popular south of the equator around the world is Pentecostalism, the movement started in the early years of the 20th century at Asuza Seminary in California. Pentecostal Christianity is defined by an embodied and passionate faith in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This someone told me, perhaps the first 1500 years of the church are a defining of the faith according to our understanding of who God is. Then after 1500, the church sought to understand itself according to who Jesus was and is. And now, we are in the midst of the Reformation by way of the Holy Spirit. I do not think this view is wrong at all. Whether we identify as Pentecostal or Congregational or Protestant or any other flavor of Christianity, we are all being driven into the wilderness of the world by the Holy Spirit now.

*How can these things be?*

It is really hard to see beyond one's training, one's culture, one's increasingly embedded worldview. We get lost in the minutiae of the faith. Perhaps our concern is doctrine - making sure everyone is thinking rightly about Scripture, forgetting that, now, if you start spouting doctrine to most of the people beyond these walls, they will have no idea, no context, for what you are talking about. Perhaps our concern is liturgy - the workings of worship itself, forgetting that just because we have always done it that way or the pastor says we are doing it this way, most people have no idea at all why we are doing whatever we are doing in the first place. We forget that this is about faith, about who we are and whose we are. And so, when new things and new ways of thinking arise in our faith lives, we wonder with Nicodemus,

*How can these things be?*

If Jesus' words today are about anything, they are about about the ways of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says to him,

*Listen, don't get hung up with the literal meaning of 'being born again from above'. This is about the movement of the Holy Spirit. How does the Holy Spirit move? Like the wind. You don't know where it came from, and once it arrives, you don't know how the Spirit got here. And when you arrive where the Holy Spirit already is, the world looks very different. You may even see glimpses of the Kingdom of God there.*

What Jesus tells us here is so important. When we are following the Holy Spirit, we do not know where we will end up. We may not even know where we began. That is because following the Holy Spirit, following Jesus, is an act of trust, complete trust, which, by the way, is probably the best translation of what we translate as 'believe' in Scripture.

Think about Abraham. God tells Abraham,

*Leave behind your family. Leave behind your inheritance. Leave behind the only land you know, and go out into the world until I show you where you will now be. Trust that I will bless you and your family and your descendants and the land you come to, because since I have blessed you, you will be a blessing to all the world.*

And Abraham does it. He leaves everything. He trusts absolutely and walks into the unknown land and into an unknown future. This is the gesture, the move, the act of one who trusts the Holy Spirit. This is the meaning of what *having faith* is all about.

When I was a counselor for outdoor camps, we would do a ropes course and various 'team building' things before the campers arrived. One of the things we would do was a trust fall. We would begin with partners, and turn around and fall into our partner, who would catch us. Then we would stand on a little riser and let two or three people catch us. Then we would move up until we were 6 feet off the ground and let six or seven people catch us when we fell. It is called a trust fall because you trust *people you know are there but that you can't see* to catch you. Everyone was caught when they fell. Including myself, someone who is not nearly as trusting as I might seem.

Abraham does a spiritual trust fall. Jesus calls Nicodemus to make a similar trust fall. It is as if Jesus is saying,

*Beyond all the doctrines, beyond all the liturgy and hymns and candles and rituals, beyond all the cultural cohesion that happens with your fellow believers, beyond all the thoughts you have, you must trust that God is with you. Isn't this how the Holy Spirit always works?*

Once we see with the eyes of faith, we cannot unsee what we have been shown. And what we see is quite a powerful thing. We understand that the God we trust, the God whose presence we sense in our lives is, as Paul tells us, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the

*God ... who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist*

we understand that these things can only be if God is a God of love. Love is a force and a way of being, and love can only truly be present when we have released from love all the things that would hold love down. Love thrives in the promise of not knowing, in the presence of trust that is implicit in the whole idea of love itself. Love always brings us to new places that we could not have known beforehand.

We are like Nicodemus when we come to the words that Jesus uses to sum up why he is among us. We have heard these words so many times, we think we know what they mean. But let us allow ourselves to be like Nicodemus, and hear these words again, as if for the first time. Let Jesus' words bring you to an unknown place, a new way of seeing built on complete trust in the love God already has for each of us, we who have been created to be a blessing because we are blessed in the same way Abraham and Nicodemus were blessed.

*For God so loved the world, the universe, that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes, whoever trusts, will not perish but have eternal life.*

Whenever we say this verse, we should always include the verse that follows, because it speaks to the non-judgmental nature of God's love for all people:

*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*

Love is salvation, and salvation is for all, including Nicodemus.

We may not, like Nicodemus, understand what is being said here, but I believe the Gospel of John shows us that Nicodemus does understand that in order to understand heavenly things, especially heavenly things that have come to earth, we must first trust. Trust comes before understanding. Augustine used to say that faith always precedes understanding, and understanding anything of God's world cannot come about until one has faith.

*How can these things be?*

We may not know much, but what we can know from today is that God is a loving God who does not seek condemnation, but salvation, and we know that the Holy Spirit will bring us to unknown and new experiences and places and people. And we know that, since we are descendants of Abraham, we are blessed to be a blessing to and for the world.

*How can these things be?*

These things can be because, like Abraham, like Nicodemus is learning, we trust in God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Follow the Holy Spirit, and fall into the blessings and possibilities of your Lord.

Amen.