

Sermon for Sunday, March 8, 2020

Making A Difference

Up to Something Unexpected

Our story this morning begins with a description--Nicodemus came to Jesus by night—for the author of John, this isn't just a way of telling us when the conversation took place—but the author uses “night” as a metaphor for disbelief—it was in his disbelief and curiosity that Nicodemus approached Jesus hoping for some answers.

Nicodemus begins by using the title “Rabbi” which means teacher—then he makes a statement “We (the other Pharisees) know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” It's clear, Nicodemus has either heard tails of what Jesus has done—or maybe he has even witnessed firsthand one of the signs Jesus had performed.

Perhaps, Nicodemus was even at the wedding at Cana and saw with his own eyes, the gallons and gallons of water—that, by Jesus involvement--became the best possible wine—which was then served to very happy and unassuming guests...

We don't really know the method, but somehow—Nicodemus knows about the signs Jesus has performed, which made him curious—so curious he want's to know more and hear from him first hand—but not so curious to approach Jesus in the daylight—when others might be watching...

Adding to the mystery--Nicodemus words sound close to a statement of faith—he recognizes that what Jesus has been able to do through the signs he's performed point to the undeniable truth that God is somehow present with Jesus.

But after Nicodemus speaks, Jesus does almost a Kungfu move, instead of meeting Nicodemus' statement with confirmation or affirmation-he takes the conversation in a whole new direction saying, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

And just like that Nicodemus abandons the conversation he started, and get's sucked in to what Jesus has said. What unfolds is a very convoluted conversation between two people who seem to be talking past each other.

Nicodemus in a very pragmatic way, wonders “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”

And Jesus, again, deflects, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

Nicodemus wants to understand how this is going to work from a biological and practical perspective, while Jesus is attempting to reveal that God is up to something radical, new, and unexpected.

To our 21st century ears, to be born of “water and Spirit” has reference to baptism—but it also has another meaning—following this story, in chapter 4—Jesus will meet a Samaritan woman by a well—during their encounter Jesus will offer her “living water” and he will also reveal that he is the Messiah. So, to be born of water can allude to baptism, it can also be understood as trusting, or believing in Jesus Christ as our true source of life.

Likewise, to be born of the Spirit has a reference at the end of John’s gospel—in chapter 20 after Jesus has died and been raised, he appears to his disciples, and gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit by breathing on them—believing and trusting in Christ is how we can receive and be born from the Spirit.

Nicodemus is focused on how someone can physically be reborn—Jesus is giving him a glimpse of something mysterious and new...it’s so far beyond what he can comprehend—the final words we hear Nicodemus say in this passage is a question: “how can these things be?”

But if we go back to the beginning, to what Nicodemus originally stated—he said “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

For Nicodemus, the signs Jesus has done point to God being present—but through the conversation Jesus is slowly revealing that God is not only present—but has taken on human form—God hasn’t dispatched a good teacher in order to be present through them—but God is now standing in the middle of the broken, messy and deeply loved world with an offer of new life—to be born of water and spirit--because God is up to something radical, new and unexpected.

After Nicodemus’ final question in Verse 9, Jesus continues speaking—and it’s here that we get one of the most well known verses in the bible “for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

As well-known as this passage is—it’s important to reconnect with the rest of story—verse 17 continues—“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.”

Out of deep love for all of creation and humanity, through Jesus God is offering something new—a new way of living and being in the world. To be “saved”, carries not only a spiritual meaning but also an everyday, in the middle of the messy, broken, chaotic world, meaning.

To be saved, is to believe that God offers us a different way of living spiritually in our relationship with God which then affects who we are in the world with others.

This is also where the play of light and darkness comes in—darkness—for the author of John, isn't only disbelief—but it goes deeper—it is broken relationship with God and with others...

We see “light” through the person and ministry of Christ—because through him, God became human in order to mend the broken places; to feed the hungry, offer water to the thirsty, heal the sick, liberate the oppressed, comfort the grieving, show us what it means to be in relationship with God and in so doing, shine light in the darkness—Through Christ, God made a way for us to be born of water and Spirit and to join the family of God—God came not to condemn but to touch the places in our world and in our lives that desperately need saving...because God is up to something unexpected.

During this season of Lent—we may find ourselves like Nicodemus—curious about what God might be up to in our lives and world, but holding on to expected patterns and the answers we think we know—but what if God is moving in ways we aren't expecting? Can we be open to acknowledging the places in our own hearts where darkness has crept in?

Because what if the places of darkness in our own hearts, are the places where our hearts have grown hard toward others?

What if we described darkness as the places in ourselves where our desires for power and privilege have taken priority over other people's wellbeing?

Where our attention has been so focused on being right we have sacrificed relationships?

Where hurts and traumas from long ago—darkness not of our own creating but imposed and inflicted upon us--have closed us off from the world and even ourselves?

How might God be offering us something new? How might God be moving in ways that are unexpected?

Where in our own lives are we looking for rebirth? Where are we asking God's Spirit for new life?

Because what Jesus offers isn't a nice idea or good teaching but a liberation—which has real life meaning—to be freed from what weighs us down—in order to pickup and live into, the new and abundant life God offers.

Like Nicodemus we may be taken off guard by what God is up to—but during this season of Lent, we have the opportunity to intentionally sit with the places of darkness in our lives and invite God's presence with the firm hope that having been born of Water and Spirit—God's light will be present—because God is up to something radical, new and unexpected.

A sermon preached by
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