



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – October 7, 2007

How Can These Things Be?
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John 3:1-17

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus^a by night and said to him, “Rabbi, 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.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”^b ⁴

Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.”^c ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You^d must be born from above.”^e ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you^f do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”^g ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.ⁱ

^a Gk *him*

^b Or *born anew*

^c The same Greek word means both *wind* and *spirit*

^d The Greek word for *you* here is plural

^e Or *anew*

^f The same Greek word means both *wind* and *spirit*

^g The Greek word for *you* here and in verse 12 is plural

^h Other ancient authorities add *who is in heaven*

ⁱ Some interpreters hold that the quotation concludes with verse 15

¹⁶ “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.

¹⁷ “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.

You might say Nicodemus had it all together. After all, he was a respected religious leader, a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews. Imagine a first century cross between Cardinal Egan and Senator Lieberman – tall hat, salt and pepper beard, flowing robes – sweeping through the Jerusalem precincts with a retinue of doting assistants scurrying to keep up.

But then again, you might say Nicodemus was a tragic figure. For all that acumen, for all that striving, for all that worldly success, there was something sadly missing. For all those years teaching Torah, for all those years leading the sacred rituals, for all those years carefully arranging his vestments with “shalom” embroidered across his stole, his own life lacked the shalom of a deeply peaceful, whole, flourishing life.

As our story opens, Nicodemus is literally and figuratively in the dark. Cloaked in anonymity, he emerges from the shadows for his late night rendezvous with the young mystic from Galilee. You can almost see Nicodemus’ eyes glistening with hope as he tugs his robe back from his face and pays his most respectful compliment to the rough-hewn Jesus, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God.”

Who amongst us doesn’t sympathize with old Nicodemus as he leans forward for his answer. Who amongst us wouldn’t want just 15 minutes with Jesus to say, “Please, Mr. Jesus, I really want . . . I really need the life you promise, but I just don’t get it. I’ve read the parables, the riddles, the epigrams, but I just don’t understand God, or what God promises, or what God wants from me. Can’t you just boil it all down for me in words I can understand?”

So as Nicodemus leans forward, so do we. And what does old Nicodemus get for his troubles but a series of poetic, enigmatic puns and double entendres. No attentive listener could have told whether Jesus was talking about being born all over again or born from above, the waters of birth or the waters of baptism, a shifting wind or an unpredictable Spirit, a body lifted up on a cross or a king lifted up on a throne.

Nicodemus wanted a three point essay, but he got e.e. cummings. He wanted Map Quest, but he got Picasso. He wanted Rogers and Hammerstein, but he got Harold Pinter. What Nicodemus wanted was a straight little heart to heart, and what Nicodemus got was the spiritual version of Abbot and Costello's great "Who's on First" bit. Jesus speaks of the Spiritual, but Nicodemus understands only the material, and so he retreats back into the darkness, set up in the story as the straight man who just doesn't get it.

But doesn't some part of us identify with old Nick? Haven't an awful lot of us been cast in the left-brain role in life? I know I've been. I'm the guy who would memorize the poem and then go blank trying to understand it. I'm the guy who would ask Amy out to see the Martha Graham Dance Company and then drum my fingers in uncomprehending boredom. I'm the guy who would chair the church personnel committee and then squirm in my pew wondering what we were supposed to get out of Sunday worship anyway.

And then something happened. That, by the way, is the key phrase in every spiritual journey: "and then something happened." What happened first was that my left brain approach to life broke down. I fell into an abyss of suffering that no amount of logic, or linear thinking, or analytic problem solving could resolve. Life cast me – not faith – life cast me into the role of urgent seeker.

What happened second is a course of spiritual experiences that culminated with Jesus sitting down across from me on the Washington Metro. I was sitting next to a window on the right-hand side of the train, silently repeating Luke's nativity story like a mantra. Suddenly, there he was, sitting on the aisle seat across from me: beard, sandals, robe – the whole Jesus "schmeer." He just looked at me steadily and

said, "Skip, do not be anxious. I am going to take care of everything." And just that quickly he was gone. Now, I've told that story from this pulpit before, but this morning I want to emphasize what happened next. For what happened next is that my little left brain analytics kicked right back into gear. How should I understand what I had just experienced? Had Jesus, Son of the Most High, just popped in on me in the Washington Metro? Had I slipped into a day dream while repeating my little mantra? Had I fallen asleep and begun to dream? Had my exhausted mind generated some type of hallucination?

You know, I rolled the data over and over again in my mind, and no matter how I analyzed it, I couldn't resolve the ambiguity of what had just happened.¹ All I knew for sure was that the experience, whatever it was, had brought a glimpse of peace, and wholeness, and life. And it seemed to me, whether encounter or vision or dream, however ambiguous or uncertain, my little experience was at least continuous with the experiences spiritual people have been reporting for thousands of years. And, most importantly, most importantly I could feel something deep down inside me decide that I was going with it. It wasn't so much that I intellectually grasped the meaning of it as that I was deeply grasped by the awesome power of it.

To this day, I don't know for sure what happened on that metro car, but it has pretty much determined a lot of what followed over the next twenty years, including the fact that I am preaching to you from this pulpit this morning. Some part of me wishes I could make clearer, or bolder, or more categorical claims about what happened that morning. Some part of me wishes the experience had instantly resolved all my doubts forever. But I just didn't get those gifts, moreover, twenty-two years of study has persuaded me that spiritual experience is inherently ambiguous, necessarily beyond our easy description and understanding. As Blaise Pascal wrote in the 17th century, "[God] so regulates the knowledge of Himself that he has given signs of Himself, visible to those who seek Him, and not to those who seek him not. There is enough light for those who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition."²

Like Nicodemus, most of us yearn for a simple explanation, an unambiguous experience, a clear resolution of Spiritual reality. And there have always

been and always will be charismatic church leaders advertising the simplistic certainty we seek; but the author of John's Gospel wasn't one of them. John's point in the Nicodemus story is that God's full Spiritual reality is too majestic for our analytic powers, too glorious for our simple description, too elusive to conform to our expectations.³ John knows, as our greatest poets and artists and dramatists have always contended, that the pinnacles of the highest truths can only be glimpsed through the lenses of metaphor, paradox, and irony. ⁴ Or, as Saint Paul had put it: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully." 1 Corinthians 13:12.

All of which means our small, ambiguous Spiritual intimations will always put us, like Nicodemus, to a decision, or perhaps a series of daily decisions. What shall we make of these intimations? As the English mystic Evelyn Underhill concluded:

The strange little golden intimations of beauty and holiness that flash up through life, however they come, do present a fundamental problem to us. Are these intimations of Reality in its most precious aspect, the faint beginnings of an experience, a development of life, towards which we can move; or are they mere will-o-the-wisps? Shall we trust them and give them priority, or regard them with curiosity that borders on contempt? In other words, is reality spiritual? Is the only concrete reality God, as the mystics have always declared? And is that richly real and living God present to and pressing upon His whole creation or is this merely a pious idea? Are man's small spiritual experiences testimonies to a vast truth, which in its wholeness lies far beyond us, or not? We have to choose between these alternatives; and the choice will settle the character of our religion and philosophy, and will also colour the whole texture of existence. . . .'⁵

How will you make your choice? When will you make your choice? I don't know – but here's what I do know, as certainly as I know anything. To follow old Nicodemus, muttering "how can these things be?" and shrugging off the Spiritual Dimension of life is to follow him back out into the dark. To follow Jesus, however haltingly, however imperfectly, however provisionally⁶ – which is, after all, all the disciples managed to do – is to follow the one who promises, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Amen.

1 Every experience is a paradox in that it means to be absolute, and yet is relative; in that it somehow always goes beyond itself and yet never escapes itself.

T.S. Eliot

All significant truths are private truths. As they become public they cease to become truths; they become facts, or at best, part of the public character; or at worst, catchwords.

T. S. Eliot

2 Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York, Penguin: 1995), 118. cf Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (Penguin, 1966) pages 162-63: Nature has nothing to offer me that does not give rise to doubt and anxiety. If I saw no sign there of a Divinity I should decide on a negative solution: If I saw signs of a Creator everywhere I should peacefully settle down in the faith. But, seeing too much to deny and not enough to affirm, I am in a pitiful state, where I have wished a hundred times over that, if there is a God supporting nature, she should unequivocally proclaim him, and that, if the signs in nature are deceptive, they should be completely erased; that nature should say all or nothing so that I could see what course I ought to follow. Instead of that, in the state in which I am, not knowing what I am nor what I ought to do, I know neither my condition nor my duty. My whole heart strains to know what the true good is in order to pursue it: no price would be too high to pay for eternity.

3 Jean Moroux, "The Idea of Religious Experience," in *The Religious Experience* (Vol. II), edited by George Brantl (1964), page 995: The presence and possession of God which are realized in religious experience can never be anything more than a preliminary sketch, a seed, a hope. God is never discovered, in the strict sense of the word; and the more we enter into the mystery of him, the more we know him as someone essentially unknown, and each day, by the power of that negative affirmation which alone can give us being here below, we are taken further and further beyond all that is clear and distinct and consciously perceived. God is never possessed, in the strict sense of the word, because he is not grasped in himself, and consequently the more nearly he is approached the more he is taken hold of as somebody absent, a presence that is always slipping away, a "beyond" sustaining the whole experience but never to be identified with it. Thus the presence of God is a hope, not a reality given to us in full; and religious experience is a continual search for God's presence... For the only result of any finding is more seeking—in this highest of all regions, in which possession only gives birth to further desire, and meeting is the motive force of more self-giving.

4 From GK Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1908), page 148:

<http://www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~mward/gkc/books/orthodoxy/ch6.html>

The real trouble with this world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonable, but not quite. Life is not an illogicality; yet it is a trap for logicians. It looks just a little more mathematical and regular than it is; its exactitude is obvious, but its inexactitude is hidden; its wildness lies in wait. I give one coarse instance of what I mean. Suppose some mathematical creature from the moon were to reckon up the human body; he would at once see that the essential thing about it was that it was duplicate. A man is two men, he on the right exactly resembling him on the left. Having noted that there was an arm on the right and one on the left, a leg on the right and one on the left, he might go further and still find on each side the same number of fingers, the same number of toes, twin eyes, twin ears, twin nostrils, and even twin lobes of the brain. At last he would take it as a law; and then, where he found a heart on one side, would deduce that there was another heart on the other. And just then, where he most felt he was right, he would be wrong.

It is this silent swerving from accuracy by an inch that is the uncanny element in everything. It seems a sort of secret treason in the universe. An apple or an orange is round enough to get itself called round, and yet is not round after all. The earth itself is shaped like an orange in order to lure some simple astronomer into calling it a globe. A blade of grass is called after the blade of a sword, because it comes to a point; but it doesn't. Everywhere in things there is this element of the quiet and incalculable. It escapes the rationalists, but it never escapes till the last moment. From the grand curve of our earth it could easily be inferred that every inch of it was thus curved. It would seem rational that as a man has a brain on both sides, he should have a heart on both sides. Yet scientific men are still organizing expeditions to find the North Pole, because they are so fond of flat country. Scientific men are also still organizing expeditions to find a man's heart; and when they try to find it, they generally get on the wrong side of him.

Now, actual insight or inspiration is best tested by whether it guesses these hidden malformations or surprises. If our mathematician from the moon saw the two arms and the two ears, he might deduce the two shoulder-blades and the two halves of the brain. But if he guessed that the man's heart was in the right place, then I should call him something more than a mathematician. Now, this is exactly the claim which I have since come to propound for

Christianity. Not merely that it deduces logical truths, but that when it suddenly becomes illogical, it has found, so to speak, an illogical truth. It not only goes right about things, but it goes wrong (if one may say so) exactly where the things go wrong. Its plan suits the secret irregularities, and expects the unexpected. It is simple about the simple truth; but it is stubborn about the subtle truth. It will admit that a man has two hands, it will not admit (though all the Modernists wail to it) the obvious deduction that he has two hearts. It is my only purpose in this chapter to point this out; to show that whenever we feel there is something odd in Christian theology, we shall generally find that there is something odd in the truth.

5 From Evelyn Underhill, "Spiritual Life" from *Mixed Pasture*, reprinted in Garvey at 15.

6 C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Harvest, 1955) page 177:

What I like about experience is that it is such an honest thing. You may take any number of wrong turnings; but keep your eyes open and you will not be allowed to go very far before the warning signs appear. You may have deceived yourself, but experience is not trying to deceive you. The universe rings true wherever you fairly test it.