

Nick at Night

Genesis 12:1-4, John 3:1-17, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

First Presbyterian Church

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One of the disadvantages of being a Presbyterian is that you hear so few good conversion stories. ¹ There are many great things about being Presbyterian, but if you want to hear a good conversion story you'd be better off watching TV or going to a movie or reading a good novel... because you're probably not going to get it at church.

Duke Divinity School's, Richard Lischer, tells about a rare experience he had as a parish pastor. One Sunday morning the "pillar" of his church stopped by his office just before services to tell him he'd been "born again." "You've been what?" Lischer asked. "Yeah, I know it's unbelievable... but it's true! Last week I visited my brother-in-law's church – the Running River of Life Tabernacle – and I don't know what it was, but something happened and I'm born again now." "You CAN'T be born again," his pastor said, "you're a Lutheran. You sing in the choir. You lead the Men of the Church. You're the chairman of the board of trustees. You can't be born again!" Well, as this pillar of the church was brimming with joy and enthusiasm, Lischer was sulking... because spiritual renewal is a wonderful thing as long as it occurs within acceptable channels... and does not threaten our mainline understanding of God." In our Gospel lesson this morning, we read of another "pillar of the church" – a man named Nicodemus – who cannot understand how he can be born again.

John 3:1-17

³Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus 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." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."
⁴Nicodemus 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?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The 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." ⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus 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 do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have

¹ Richard Lischer, "Pick it up, read it." Christian Century, February 17, 1999, p. 179

eternal life. 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.

I mentioned at the beginning of the service that Abraham became a model of faith and trust for generations who came after him. The Apostle Paul was one of those who looked to Abraham as an early example of the profound truth that we are saved by grace through faith... and not by works of the law.

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

⁴What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” ⁴Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

¹³For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. ¹⁶For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”) —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Sermon

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. She began by reading every book and article she could get her hands on - history, philosophy, psychology, and religion... yet, though this made her a very smart person, nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for. So she found some other smart people and asked them about the meaning of life. But while their discussions were long and lively and interesting, no two of them could agree on the same thing and still she had no answer. Finally, she put all her belongings in storage and set off on a journey in search of the meaning of life. She went to South America... she went to Africa... she went to India. And everywhere she went, people told her THEY didn't know the meaning of life, but they had heard of a man who did... only they were not sure where he lived. So, she asked about him in every country on earth until finally, deep in the Himalayas, someone told her how to reach his house - a tiny little hut perched on the side of a mountain just below the tree line. She climbed and climbed to reach his front door. And when she finally got there... (with knuckles so cold they hardly worked) she knocked. "Yes?" said the kind-looking old man who opened the door. When she saw him the woman thought she would die of happiness. "I have come halfway around the world," she said gasping for breath... "I've

come all this way to ask you one question - What is the meaning of life?" "Please come in and have some tea," the old man said. "No," she said. "I mean, no thank you. You see, I didn't come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. Won't you please tell me what is the meaning of life?" "We shall have tea," the old man said. So she gave up and went inside. While he was brewing the tea, she began telling him about all the books and articles she had read... all the people she had met and talked to... all the places she had been... and as the old man listened intently, he placed a fragile tea cup in her hand and began to pour the tea. Well, she was so busy talking about her books and conversations and travels that she didn't notice when the tea cup was full. So the old man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides of the cup and spilled to the floor like a steaming waterfall. "What are you doing?!" she yelled when the tea burned her hand. "It's full, can't you see that? Stop! There's no more room!" "Just so," the old man said to her. "You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no more room in your cup. Come back when it is empty... and then we will talk."²

Meanwhile, several thousand miles to the west, a ruler of the Jews named Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. These two dispensed with a tea ritual, but the outcome was the same. Nicodemus came to Jesus looking for answers... but Jesus wouldn't cooperate. Instead, he poured tea all over Nicodemus' hand and said, in effect, that Nicodemus already had gallons of answers in his cup. What he lacked... what he needed... was just one drop of spiritual experience - just one moment of new birth - because if he had that, he could leave all his answers behind. And when Nicodemus protested... when he admitted he didn't have a clue what Jesus was talking about, Jesus said to this well-read and learned man, "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

A big part of the problem, I think, was that Jesus and Nicodemus had very different definitions for the word "believe."³ On one level, to believe someone means simply to accept what that person says as true. Based on some kind of evidence, you accept what that person says is true. Let's imagine someone shows you a picture of herself mountain climbing. She is climbing up the sheer rock face of a mountain... and when you see the picture and she tells you it can be done... you say, "OK, I believe you," by which means you accept the proposition... you acknowledge that the mountain can be climbed. But that's as far as it goes... it doesn't really change YOU or the way you live YOUR life - because it is all in your head.

But there's another level of belief that's more than just intellectual – it's much more visceral... it's much more experiential. So instead of just showing you pictures of someone else mountain climbing, she invites you to go climbing with her. On the ground, she checks the knots on your harness and runs your safety line through the carabiner around her own waist. She tells you she will be your "belayer" and assures you that she's got you... and can hold you... everything will be all right... you will be safe. Well, your response at that point is not "I believe you," but "I believe IN you," because as you leave the ground and start up that rock face, you're way past

² Barbara Brown Taylor in "Stay for tea, Nicodemus," Christian Century, February 21, 1996.

³ This also comes from Taylor's essay.

looking at pictures. No, you now have a “life-or-death” relationship with this person... you now are trusting her with your very life.

This story of Nicodemus’ late-night rendezvous with Jesus is one of my favorite Gospel stories because there are three things I love about Nicodemus. First, I love that he was a **senior citizen**... which means he was like many of us here this morning (no offense intended). We know he was an elder because it took time to get where he was. There was a process to becoming a leader of the Jews... and that process took time – so when it came to matters of faith, Nicodemus had been around the block a few times.

The second thing I love about him is that he was a senior citizen that hadn’t just taken to the rocking chair. He was a very curious man... he was still seeking... he was still open to seeing new things... today we might call him a “lifelong learner.”

And finally, I love that when he came to Jesus that night, this curious, seeking, lifelong learner was already halfway there. He knew Jesus was good - he had heard him teach... he had checked his references - but he wanted more information. It’s like he was already standing at the foot of the mountain but wanted to see reports on any recent rock-climbing accidents... and to check out the insurance coverage... and to handle the equipment and maybe even try it on for size. He wanted the teacher to say something that would take away his doubts and make it easy for him to say yes. But the teacher would not cooperate. “Believe IN me,” – that was Jesus’ challenge to Nicodemus. “Turn your cup upside down, old man. Turn your mind inside out. Step into the air. Ride the wind. Be born anew.”

How can this be? These are Nicodemus’ last words to Jesus that night... and I, for one, am glad he asked... because it’s my question too. How can I... a man who will soon be a senior citizen... (or already am according to the amount of mail I get from the AARP)... how can I... a man who has been at this whole “faith thing” a good long while... how can I be born anew... from above? Here is how, Jesus says. Watch me. You put your hand here... now bring up your right foot... then your left. Don’t think about it too hard... just do as I do and you’ll be fine. Believe me. Believe IN me. I’ve got you. I’ve got you. Amen.