**Walking in the Light**

**Text: John 3:3**

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I believe it was Lucy, from the Peanuts comic strip, who said, “Those of you who think you know it all are bugging those of us who really do.”

Absolute certainty is a dangerous thing. The universe is so much more vast than anything that our puny little minds can comprehend. And what we *can* comprehend is limited by our experience, our self-interest, and the small sample of data that we’ve actually studied. *And*, God always has more truth to reveal to us. As the Pilgrims’ pastor, John Robinson, said just before the Mayflower set sail, “God has yet more truth and light to break forth from his holy Word.”

Absolute certainty is a dangerous thing. And yet, when times are changing, and everything is in flux, and cherished ways of living and thinking are being challenged, we humans tend to grasp on to what we *think* we know with ever-greater certainty. Like the grandmother of Anetta Diekmann. Miss Diekmann was one of the saints of my church when I was a boy. She told a story to my Sunday School class about her grandmother, who’d come to this country from Germany many, many years before. As the years passed and family members abandoned the ways of the old country, Grandma became very upset. One day there was a big family argument about all these changes, and as Grandma Diekmann stormed out of the room she said, “Well, I know one thing for sure: Jesus spoke German!”

In uncertain times, we think we know more than we really do. Which brings us to the Pharisees; and one Pharisee in particular: Nicodemus. Times were certainly uncertain as John’s gospel was being written. *Everything* was in flux. And Nicodemus represents the old order; the folks who think they know it all, even as they cling to old certainties that are rapidly fading away. Nicodemus appears only in John’s gospel, which makes me think that he may be a literary creation of the author. John perhaps creates a fictional character named Nicodemus to represent the historic group of Jewish scholars and leaders known as the Pharisees. These folks knew a lot, to be sure. They were students and teachers of the Jewish Law; keepers of the core of the Jewish tradition.

But by the latter part of the first century, the one-time certainties of that tradition were being called into question. There was a new movement within Judaism called Christianity, and Jewish Christians were suggesting that there is one teacher above all other teachers that must be followed, and his name is Jesus. Some of these Jewish-Christians were going so far as to invite non-Jews into their communities, included the hated Samaritans. Jewish leaders were pushing back by kicking Jewish-Christians out of the synagogue. And Christians were fighting among themselves as to who this Jesus guy really is. The fact that there are four gospels reflects something of this fight. They all agreed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. But for Matthew’s church, Jesus is the ideal Pharisee: wiser, and much more humble, than all those other Pharisees. For Luke’s church, he is the defender of the poor and the oppressed. I think Mark’s church is fundamentally confused about who Jesus was. And John’s church is really pushing the outside of the envelope: for them, Jesus is the Holy One – Jesus is the Divine Word – who has become flesh and lives among us.

Amidst all of this confusion, the Pharisees think they know it all. Not unlike certain groups in our own day, on both the right and the left, who think they alone know the truth and they will not compromise. The Pharisees think they are absolutely right – they think they know it all – but in fact – from John’s perspective – they are misguided, they are confused, and they are living in the dark.

And so it is by night – so it is in the dark – that the Pharisee Nicodemus comes to Jesus. At least he *recognizes* that he’s in the dark. At least he *recognizes* that he needs to be enlightened by Jesus. As a professor at Hiram College once said, “You know that you know when you know that you *don’t* know.” And Nicodemus is beginning to suspect that there’s a *whole lot* that he doesn’t know. That’s why he goes to talk with Jesus.

He starts with flattery. “Oh Jesus, you are such a great teacher, you come from God, you perform such wondrous signs [by which he means healing and other miracles, or – as it says in the Greek – deeds of mighty power], no one could do what you do apart from the presence of God.”

That’s what Nicodemus says, and Jesus replies, “Yah, yah, I’ve heard it all before Nicodemus, let’s just cut to the quick: You must be born from above.”

Two important things here: first of all, the “you” is plural. There are two different Greek words for “you:” one means “you” (singular) and the other means “you all;” or perhaps, “all you’ll.” We’re dealing with the plural here: “you all.” Jesus isn’t simply addressing Nicodemus, he’s addressing the whole community that Nicodemus represents: meaning at the very least the Pharisees, and maybe the entire Jewish establishment, and maybe everyone who thinks they know it all and will not bend.

So, first of all the “you” is plural and secondly, Jesus is calling for a radical transformation that begins and ends and is guided…by God. Our text says, “You must be born from above;” we are more familiar with the translation that says, “You must be born again.” Same Greek phrase – and, of course, John is writing in Greek – same Greek phrase, can be translated either way. But “born from above” puts the emphasis on who *initiates* the rebirth; who instigates the transformation: it’s God.

So Jesus is saying, “Look, Nicodemus: your whole community needs to be transformed, and it’s only going to happen by the grace of God; it’s only going to happen in the power of the Holy Spirit.”

We have to be transformed in the power of the Holy Spirit: not just you, not just me, as a *community* we have to be transformed. That’s the first thing that Jesus tells Nicodemus. And the second thing is this: transformation begins not with what you know, but with what you don’t know. Transformation begins with a healthy dose of humility and a willingness to trust mystery. “You can hear the sound of the wind,” Jesus says, “but since you’re hiding inside from the gathering storm, you don’t know the direction from which the wind is coming and the direction in which it is going. And even if you did know, the wind is going to go wherever it’s going, and there isn’t a whole lot that you can do about that.”

The wind. Again, in Greek, the same word – *pneuma* – can be translated either “wind” or “spirit.” What Jesus is really talking about here is the Holy Spirit, and the mystery of the Holy Spirit. You see, only God knows for sure what God is doing. Only God can be absolutely certain about things. And the sooner that we humans let go of our certainty and trust God’s Mystery, the better off everyone will be.

Transformation begins with a healthy dose of humility and a willingness to trust God’s Mystery. That’s what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, and to all who are a little too certain about things, and to all of us. One of the great Christian thinkers of the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr, said something like this: “True wisdom begins with recognizing the truth in your opponent’s error, and the error in your own truth.” The Holy Spirit is at work when we talk with each other, especially when we talk with those with whom we disagree. And if we can suspend our own “certainties” long enough to listen to someone else’s point of view, we might learn something new; we might gain wisdom. Like when this old liberal shut-up long enough to listen to folks who are much more conservative than I am talk about the virtues of individual freedom and entrepreneurial initiative. I learned something from them. If government *over*-regulates, you lose that free space in which the entrepreneurial spirit can work. I only hope that they were listening long enough to learn something from me as well: entrepreneurial initiative is often still born without government funding. It took entrepreneurial initiative to create the great railroads of the 19th century. It took government funding to transform that great idea into a vast network spanning the continent from sea to shining sea. We have to admit that we don’t know some things, and talk with those who might be able to fill in some gaps in our knowledge; even as we share something that we *do* know, and fill in some of the gaps in *their* knowledge. That’s how we gain wisdom. When we recognize that we don’t know it all, and we listen to one another, the Holy Spirit flows through our conversation and teaches us something. And we are transformed.

Humbly admitting that there’s a lot that we don’t know, trusting the mystery that shrouds God: these are among the fruits of being transformed by the Spirit. When Jesus reminds Nicodemus about the mystery of the wind – from whence it cometh and whither it goeth – he reminds him that a similar sense of mystery comes to “everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:8).

And you know what? When transformation begins in the power of the Spirit, and we receive a healthy sense of mystery, we become less judgmental. Consider verses 16 and 17. Verse 16, of course, many of us know by heart, especially in the King James Version of the Bible:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Wonderful words! Unfortunately, we often stop right there and don’t go on to verse 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.” Or, as the Good News Bible puts it: “For God did not send his Son into the world to be its *judge*, but to be its *savior*.”

We worship a loving, accepting, gentle God; not an angry, judgmental, scary God. Yes, there are plenty of passages – especially in the Old Testament – that suggest otherwise, but we have to interpret those passages in the light of the God who encounters us in Jesus Christ. That would be the Jesus who came not to judge us, but to save us; the Jesus who receives us in the same way that a parent receives a little child. Sometimes little kids act as if they know a whole lot more than they really do: like when they’re explaining the rules of a game to you, and they get it all wrong. And we just smile and hug them. Well, that’s the way that Jesus treats us. That’s the way that the God whom we know *through* Jesus treats us. And if God – who really *does* know it all – doesn’t judge us; why should we judge others?

When times are changing and everything is in flux, we pretend to know more than we really do. It’s a way of hanging on to what we *think* we know as a defense against new things that we don’t understand. But in Jesus Christ, God is doing a *new* thing. That was true in the changing times of the 1st century, and it’s true today in the 21st century. When the wind comes-up, our temptation is to play it safe and stay close to the shore. But Jesus invites us to set sail and go on an adventure; Jesus invites us to go wherever it is that the wind of the Spirit will take us. As a community, we have to be “born from above:” we have to be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. We do this through prayer and Bible Study and outreach ministries. We do this by letting go of programs that are old and familiar, and trying something new. We do this by engaging in conversation with folks who see things differently than we do. And when we allow ourselves to be transformed by the Spirit in *all* of these ways, we step out of the darkness and into the light of a new day.

Which is exactly what Nicodemus did. He engaged in conversation with Jesus – he got to talking with someone who saw things very differently than he did – and he was transformed. By the end of John’s gospel, Nicodemus has become a follower of Jesus. He is walking in the light. He has abandoned the certainty of what he thought he knew, and embraced the de-*light*-ful mystery of walking with Jesus. We are invited by Jesus to do likewise. Amen.