

Again and Again and Again...

John 3:1-17

Whitefish UMC

March 20, 2011

2nd Sunday in Lent

- ✦ When you hear the word “sardines,” what comes to mind? If you think like a normal person—whatever that is—schools of tiny little fish in the ocean or salty, slimy little fish packed into a can are your answer. But if you’re a church youth group leader, you’ll bring forth something completely different.
- ✦ I first learned about sardines—the youth group kind—in Bozeman a dozen years ago. Whenever our activities fell flat with the kids, we would resort to a rousing game of sardines, and the kids were always happy. Sardines involves turning off all the lights in the church and choosing someone to go hide in as difficult a place as possible to find. After a short time when everyone hides their eyes and closes their ears, the rest of the youth are sent off to try to find the hiding person. But here’s the kicker—when you find the hiding person, you don’t call out, you hide with them, not telling others that you have found the target.
- ✦ When the game ends, all the youth except the last person to find the hidden ones, are packed together in the hiding place like—you guessed it—sardines!
- ✦ Now most kids really like this game, which involves lots of bumping into things in the dark and screaming because you are scared. But some youth hate it and refuse to play. I remember particularly, a

- middle schooler named Grace, otherwise courageous and creative, who just loathed sardines.
- ✦ There is some risk in sardines. You have to be careful that no deadly objects trip kids up. One year young JJ—in his wild period--with his girlfriend Maddy, ran into the fish tank in the preschool room, to tragic consequences. But the kids love to play sardines again, and again, and again.
 - ✦ Let's face it, we adults have mixed feelings about darkness—sometimes we fear it, other times we welcome the cover of night—both literal and figurative. Sometimes it helps us think and do what we wouldn't do in the light—for good or ill.
 - ✦ John's story about the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus is a story about the dark night. A ruler of Israel and a teacher, Nicodemus comes by cover of darkness to ask Jesus some questions. What he really wanted was light for the journey of life and a sign to find the way home. But like most committed to study, he wants a good academic question and answer session with another teacher.
 - ✦ He has heard this Rabbi does great and powerful things. Nicodemus is a man of power who recognizes true authority when he sees it. He comes to Jesus by night—we're not sure why—perhaps he wishes to avoid being seen by the other Pharisees, maybe he wants to catch Jesus when he is alone and off-guard.
 - ✦ Nicodemus is searching for illumination of some kind, but there is a thick density about him. He begins with a declaration, stating that he knows about Jesus, and he ends with a “How” question.

- ✦ But Jesus responds not with a three-step logical discourse, but with a declaration of God's effusive, indefinable, mysterious and amazing grace.
- ✦ Poor Nicodemus. He's not ready to be thrown off guard. He wants just the facts, intelligible answers. Instead Jesus gives him a mystery, a story about the water and the wind and an odd suggestion about being born again.
- ✦ Was Nicodemus afraid of the dark? He came to Jesus looking for a quick fix, a fast conversion from one intellectual enterprise to who he thought he wanted to be. Did he think that because he was wealthy, educated, socially acceptable that he ought to have had it made? Yet was something missing, and that caused him embarrassment?
- ✦ Coming to Jesus under the cover of night strikes a chord with me. I think a lot of us really believe that we are alone in the darkness, in our confusion, our fear. We look around and everyone else seems to have it together. Yet we come knowing that we need help to find the healing path.
- ✦ Bradley Schmelling says: "Maybe we need Lent every year to be reminded that we haven't arrived, that we're sort of stuck in the parking lot, that we're wandering in the wilderness, sojourners all of us, pilgrims seeking a new promised land. We need the wilderness so that we can imagine new ways of being with God. And we need the wilderness so that we have to rely on God and one another."
- ✦ Maybe Nicodemus' example could give all of us a little courage to leave behind what we know or what we expect to find out and open ourselves to the blowing wind of the Spirit. Could we for once let it blow where it will? Could we dare to risk asking another to help us

- find God again? And dare it be someone that we just might feel a little secretive about actually meeting with and learning from—someone not like everyone else around us?
- ✦ There is not one of us who has arrived and who couldn't be helped by yet another attempt to begin again. It's really only when we face up to the darkness that we're able to hear Jesus say that we can be born anew, we can be born again. That's the Gospel—that we can start over. God's Spirit is blowing through our lives and moving in surprising and graceful ways. It's hard to imagine that given our blindness, our resistance, and our difficulty making the journey outside ourselves that we can indeed find light in the darkness.
 - ✦ It doesn't make sense knowing all we do about ourselves that we can start over. But the point of it all is that God so loves the world that God is going to see to it that it is saved. The deepest desire in God's heart is to save us, not to condemn us.
 - ✦ But things get in the way of that. You know, the usual things: jealousy, resentment, impatience, fear, frailty, illness, crankiness. And most importantly, a failure to forgive.
 - ✦ Ah, the human condition.
 - ✦ Here we are in this season of Lent—a time of serious self-examination. A time of looking deeply within to embrace even the darkness of our own soul's life, and allowing it to be transformed by God into something that reflects God alive in us.
 - ✦ Lent is about paying attention to the dark of night and the dimness of the day, and not giving up on the mysteries of God and the strange words of Jesus about being born again, from above. During Lent,

God invites us to enter into nighttime conversations in order to shift our daytime realities.

- ✦ What we can discover in the darkness is that we can be changed, move from one understanding of the reality of living to another. We can discover new dimensions of ourselves, with God in them, that lead to the life God longs for us to have.
- ✦ John's entire Gospel begins by saying, "The light shines in darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." The message is that even though *we're* on a journey, God has arrived. That means that the Spirit breathes us toward healing and salvation. God came to help us to put the baggage down. Jesus loves Nicodemus even before that late-night knock on the door. Jesus knew he was on the inside of grace, on the inside of the Word made flesh. Jesus knew that the cross would be lifted up as a sign that would save Nicodemus even before Nicodemus dared speak his deep need for it. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world."
- ✦ It's the way every story begins. And today it's your turn to be born yet again, to be born anew, not because you ask for it or because you deserve it, but because God simply cannot be the God of Jesus Christ without offering it to you again and again and again, without cost or without price. Grace - shiny and new. In the end, it's what all of us have always hoped for. In God's love, we suddenly discover that even under the cover of darkness, we have arrived in our future.
- ✦ Oh, but you say, I have already made the decision to become a Christian—I am baptized after all—it's just that I forget, or fall into the old traps again and again.

- ✦ For many of us, the problem with this passage in the Bible is that it is used as a litmus test against us. “When were you saved?” we are sometimes asked. Fans at hockey games wear John 3:16 caps—the ability to quote this passage is used to identify a *true* Christian—to make sure you are truly saved, not just some wanna be.
- ✦ But the story of Nicodemus and what follows is not meant to condemn the person who doesn’t believe perfectly. It is not meant to be used as a test of our faith
- ✦ To be born anew or again doesn’t demand a hard heart suddenly turned around or even complete letting go of our old life. It doesn’t even mean we can name the exact hour or date of conversion or explain our changes to our audience’s satisfaction.
- ✦ In fact, because we are human, it takes many invitations from Jesus for us to become the person God wants us to be. By ourselves, we cannot be transformed and live as if we are. Jesus knows that, and he invites us, as he did Nicodemus to call upon the Holy Spirit.
- ✦ To be willing to be born anew means that we preserve a place for the mysterious in our lives, and that we live with soft souls that are willing to be changed again and again—we know we need it!!!
- ✦ The two teachers, Jesus and Nicodemus, meet under cover of darkness, and Jesus reminds Nicodemus that whatever happens to him will be as the wind in his hair or a soft kiss of air on his cheek.
- ✦ The Spirit blows where it will in our lives—it is up to us to notice, to be ready, to be willing to be changed.
- ✦ The scriptures tell us that God jumps into our world with both feet and changes our world, changes us. If God loves us enough, enjoys us enough, to give us God’s own son, our lives become more precious,

- more important, more luminous—full of light. *And other peoples' do too.* Wouldn't that change how we treated other people?
- ✦ What if we were to live as if that were really true? Now that would be a better test—not that we could remember the day we were saved. Because we have to be saved again, and again, and again from the fears, the despair, the hollowness of our darkest nights and everydays.
 - ✦ What if we were to allow the presence, the fire, the hope of God to be born again in us? What if we plunged into the life of the Holy Spirit with both feet, too?
 - ✦ Jesus invited Nicodemus into the mystery of God—water and spirit, darkness and light, wind and womb. Nicodemus couldn't make the whole journey. Will you?
 - ✦ For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Or in the words of the contemporary paraphrase of the Bible, Good As New: “If you want to know how much God loves, trust the unique self-portrait God has given the world. Then you won't shrink to nothing but always be full of life. God's likeness was not sent into the world to show the world in a bad light, but to bring healing to the world.”
 - ✦ Oh—remember the young teen who hated to play sardines in Bozeman? Grace now serves in the U.S. military overseas in Afghanistan. Her job is to seek the healing of the people of that beleaguered nation so pummeled by war. I suspect she faces the darkness--physical and spiritual and emotional often. Knowing her, she relies of the Spirit to shine light and blow new insight even in the hardest times—to save her from the despair that threatens to overcome her.

✠ What about you? Will you allow God to save and heal you again and again and again? I pray that you will be open to the Spirit's healing breath. Amen.

Sources:

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