

3-12-15 "Is It Right With Your Soul?" A Reflection on John 3:1-17 by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK

As here we are, the Second Sunday of Lent already, let me just say, "I hope you're having an amazing Lent!" If by any chance you're not so much just yet then it becomes obvious that you weren't in attendance for our first Lenten Study last Wednesday, because there, I dare say, an amazing time was had by all.

Which isn't at all surprising because Lent is designed for precisely such moments. Moments when eyes glimpse something previously unglimpse-able; moments when the presumed unknowable becomes at least hinted at, moments when hearts are strangely warmed and imaginations climax in a frenzy of anticipation over just precisely what that good God of ours might have up her sleeve.

And yes indeed, be assured, all such amazing things begin the moment any one of us, to put it very simply, seek out our Jesus. Recognize some internal need. Act on it. Go out of one's way due to an inexplicable hunger. Go on a journey for spiritual resources and spiritual sustenance. Yes, in a nutshell, that's Lent: a holy quest. Have you heard me say Lent is my favorite time of the year? It's just so darn proactive! Lent is when the rubber hits the road. Nobody who is sensitive to Lent stays at home; all are intentionally out and about hoping to discover the gem that you know in your gut is waiting for you, because you know in your gut that that is how God does God's thing.

And just so, blessed by the combined genius of the Revised Common Lectionary Committee, on our Second Sunday of Lent—just as they planned it—we encounter Nicodemus, who it can be said, went on a sort of Lenten Journey seeking Jesus and had an amazing time of it. Indeed. In fact, Nicodemus himself is an amazing character as he is something of an exception. We're accustomed to Jesus being sought out by people in clear and pressing need of healing, or food, or forgiveness, or mercy where the world has failed to deliver; but not so much from one like Nicodemus. This guy is among the power elite, the 1%; he doesn't come off as needy or vulnerable or in any obvious way, at risk. To the contrary, Nicodemus, as a Temple leader, as the Head of the Pharisees, the fellow living in the gated community with an academic entourage pretty much always in tow, "What on earth?" we would ask "would gnaw at his soul? Lead him to wander the streets at night? Send him on a spiritual quest?" Observing Nicodemus leads one to the amazing discovery that our Jesus has a transformative effect on all sorts of people—like maybe nobody is really immune.

The encounter is a famous one, and as hinted at already, notable in countless ways. First we might contemplate why Nicodemus had a burning need for Jesus, but we need not contemplate for long, as we too have had such experiences—we may not understand them, the rhyme or reason of them, but we're familiar with them; and in the night, in the dark, yes, then too, we've had such experiences... God moves somehow, some butterfly on the other side of the world flaps its wings and our hearts ache for God. It's odd, it's inexplicable; but we've come to accept such things as a common place God-thing.

Our Gospel author, John, records that Nicodemus was led to Jesus because of "the signs," unspecified "signs" that Jesus had been doing. Which though unspecified signals that Nicodemus intuited what Jesus was all about, that Jesus was out there shining a bright light on God, because after all they are "signs" which cannot be done "apart from the presence of God."

So that's pretty cool. Nic saw God in the signs Jesus did—which marvelously, is also something we observe today Jesus' friends understand as we too have had those “signs” moments.

But this morning we're only in the third chapter of this Gospel, the third. Jesus hasn't been out and about all that much just yet; not many signs have so far been performed, signaled, given... except that is for two pretty remarkable ones. The overturning of the tables in the Temple court; i.e., the display of Jesus' anger and indignation—a heck of a sign! God get's angry! Wow, who'd a thunk? But, then again maybe Nicodemus was most impressed by the *other* sign, the *first* sign and miracle mentioned in this Gospel. You know it well, the turning water into wine thing! Maybe Nicodemus *really* liked *that* sign—I mean who wouldn't? As signs go, that's a great one! “Please pass the sign... I mean the wine.” Clearly Nicodemus had a strong thirst of sorts in the middle of his amazing night.

So then the two get into a dialogue. Nic calls Jesus a “teacher who comes from God” and Jesus calls Nic “a teacher of Israel.” It's all pretty respectable but Jesus does his teaching thing and then things get all metaphorical; and sadly, people who don't understand the depth and the beauty of metaphor, people who take words literally, inevitably get tripped up at about this point. And we begin to wonder just how much Nicodemus understood of our Lord. That bit about birth and rebirth and being born again, and born from above gets thick like chowder. Where Nic stumbled he can be excused, first he is hardly alone, plenty stumble there; and secondly, it was after all late at night.

Today we know that Jesus was all about pointing beyond himself, beyond too the predictable and the perceivable, to an alternative way of living out our days that God envisions and that God enables. Like any good teacher—and Jesus was the best teacher—Jesus challenges perceptions. Jesus meets us where we are in order to move us—push, shove us, kicking and screaming—to where God is. Sure, Jesus may use fancy metaphors, sure he may not spell things out quite as concretely as some might wish, but then again, something, perhaps with God many things, simply cannot be spelled out, much less precisely...and that is a good thing. I dare say a better thing than we can imagine if for no other reason than it keeps us from coming off as smug, as if we know it all when we never, ever know it all, or even knowing as much as we think we do. Accepting that we don't possess the answer book to life is of course the first step toward possessing true wisdom.

As for the “born again thing,” this is what I hear. I hear Jesus saying that to be awakened in the ways of and to the presence of God, that one—you, I, a first century Pharisee, anyone—must somehow arrive at a place of awareness that there is indeed a power beyond themselves that will forever allude understanding. Yes, like the origin and the destination of the wind. God blows as she will, and we hear the sound of it, but it is not for us to know the precise origin or destination. It is for us to realize that it is taking place, to be at peace without knowing the particulars, and to trust in the direction it points, the direction our lives are being blown.

The wind, being an ancient metaphor for God, “blows where it chooses.” Which sometimes blows us off our feet, blows us to do odd and peculiar things, blows us to think deeply, feel deeply, feel too, highly anxious, bothered, restless, hungry. The wind of God brings matters of deep significance front and center; the wind of God doesn't permit the dust to long settle on our souls.

Some centuries ago, building upon the work of Luther and the great Reformers, a guy named John Wesley rose to the fore and ended up with something we today call the United Methodist Church. Experiencing God's blowing in his life John formed what could be called the 18th century equivalent of peer counseling groups. They were informal gatherings of people committed to the spiritual disciplines of prayer, support, study and accountability (yes, these are Lenten themes...which is why I'm mentioning them). Anyway, long story short, at the beginning of each meeting every person would be asked "How is it with your soul?" It's a question that pinpoints the most important relationship in our lives, our relationship with God and could easily be rephrased: "Is it right with your soul?" or "Is your heart right with the Lord?"

Believe me, if you're not right with the Lord you know it, and so does everybody else. People who belong to a community of faith, who are not right with the Lord, stand out, because they are out of sync, out of rhythm with, yes, the Holy Wind of God. Now, some of these out of sync souls hear the sound of it, recognize their need, and just like Nicodemus of old, proactively seek out Jesus in the middle of their long nights of despair. And when they do they feel much better. Whereas some, sadly, experience the wind and know not what to make of it and what to do with it; they fail to understand that the gusts that are assailing them are in truth God's saving grace directing them to the One who will bless them according to their need.

Friends, welcome to Lent. The time we get blown about by God's Wind, the time, with any luck, we awaken from our nights of despair to the saving Grace of God and in that awakening experience the new life God promises, the new life Easter delivers, the new life that fine tunes the heart stings until we each come to sing in sync with the mighty powers of God; and at last, by some unknown grace, the day dawns and it is right with our soul.

Praise be to God, Amen