

“Nic at Night”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
Trinity Sunday  
May 26, 2024

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Isaiah 6:1-8  
John 3:1-17

If you are looking for a sermon today that will explain the Trinity to you in a way that is digestible, mathematically correct, understandable, and has a cute description, I think I should apologize. I am most likely not going to give that to you.

I take heart, as a preacher, that Jesus did not offer Nicodemus— who came to him by night— any neat or easy answers, either. What Jesus *did* do is offer an idea that keeps giving, because it beckons curiosity; it invites wonder; it captivates attention and even desire for the new life, the new birth, that life in the Spirit has to offer.

So if I can point the way for you to do **that**, then I will be successful as a preacher.

Let me tell you more about my disclaimer. In Isaiah, we get this otherworldly description of God. It begins by telling us that the hem of God’s robe filled the Temple. Imagine that! If the hem of God’s robe filled the Temple, which was much grander than the sanctuary of the Presbyterian Church in Leonia, then imagine how big the robe must be. And imagine how much bigger the being who wore the robe must be. Isaiah gives us the idea God is bigger than anything we can wrap our heads around. Add to that smoke, swaying doorposts, and seraphs— these are little angels— with six wings fluttering around announcing, “Holy, holy, holy!” Or in Hebrew, *Kadosh! Kadosh! Kadosh!* The scripture gives the message that God is set apart from *anything* that is ordinary.

And so we have this God who is so big, so holy, and so ineffable— that is, beyond description— and so powerful that we are not even specks of dirt on the hem of God’s enormous robes. But at the same time, Jesus presents us with the idea

that we can be born of the Spirit, into the kingdom of God. As inaccessible as the description of God in Isaiah may be, Jesus presents a pathway to reaching God that is so common, so worldly, that every human has experienced something like it: being born.

No matter if you have given birth to a child or not, no matter your gender or who you love, regardless of whether your parents adopted you or gave birth to you, you have *had* the experience of being formed in a womb, and being born. And though some of us probably came out looking like aliens, childbirth is common to every human, every mammal. We probably do not remember it, but each one of us came from a body.

So what could it mean to come from the *Spirit's* body? Nicodemus asked, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Now of course Jesus is speaking metaphorically here, and Nicodemus should understand that, and maybe he did on some level. After all, as a Pharisee, he would have known sayings such as "circumcision of the heart" as the prophets taught, did not literally mean a cutting of the heart, but a heart that identifies with and is faithful to the covenant between God and Israel.

Pharisees get kind of a bad rap as legalistic, biblical literalists, and Nicodemus' question doesn't help that association either. But "rather than blindly follow the letter of the Law even if it conflicted with reason or [conscience](#), the Pharisees harmonized the teachings of the Torah with their own ideas or found their own ideas suggested or implied in it. They interpreted the Law according to its spirit. When in the course of time a law had been outgrown by changing conditions, they gave it a new and more-acceptable meaning, seeking scriptural support for their actions through" interpretation." They also sought to move Jewish practice away from being centered on the Temple, away and outside from Jerusalem, and to focus on prayer, study, and how you live your life, rather than on bloody sacrifices. They brought the tradition of the local synagogue as places where Jews could pray in lieu of pilgrimages to Jerusalem, which were inaccessible to most people.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Jewish History: Pharisee" in *Encyclopedia Britannica* May 17, 2024

I can imagine Nicodemus wondering how this concept might play out in a teaching *he* might give, and repeating the sort of question he could imagine someone from his congregation asking. It's sort of like when I imagine an idea I am working on in a sermon and how it might play out with the congregation. Believe it or not, often many of you individually play out in my sermon crafting. I think about the sorts of questions and struggles that keep you up in the night. Certain ones of you squirm— in the pews of my brain— if what I am writing is not hopeful enough, other squirm if a theological statement is not thought through well enough, and others of you are my imaginary conversation partners when I am going to say something political, and also if I am going to *abstain* from saying something political. And I always think about children and youth in the congregation, and how what I say might land with them. It's a wonder I ever get anything written at all! Thankfully, the Spirit has also given me the grace to know that I will not please everyone with every sermon. If I am faithful to the Spirit's nudging, my preaching should sometimes make you uncomfortable. If it doesn't, then I am not doing my job.

So maybe Nicodemus is trying to pin down just how he might convey these ideas to the people he teaches. However, the Spirit is not one to be pinned down. "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." In the beginning, Genesis spoke of God's creation out of a formless void. "The earth was a complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters." Let there be light, God said. And there was light. The wind from God stirred before that first act of creation— light. **Wind** in Hebrew, and in Greek, also means **Spirit**. And so, we can see the presence of the Holy Spirit in that first act of creation. And yet, in this magnificent act, *no one* else yet was there to witness what God was doing. Was it lonely for God, to create such splendor, with no one there yet to enjoy it?

We see **wind** show up again at Pentecost, and on that day it was quite the opposite: *everyone* was there. People of every culture and every language saw it; the swoosh of wind filled them; they heard the tongues, they even felt the flames.

Jesus said the wind blows where it chooses, and it seems that the wind had chosen Nicodemus. *Would Nicodemus choose Jesus back?*

Nicodemus does not come to Jesus in broad daylight, but instead slips in through the cloak of nighttime. Maybe this showed that Jesus' teachings enticed Nicodemus, and he wanted to know more or even admired Jesus— but not in a public way, until he felt more certainty about his belief and commitment. I can appreciate the weight of being a leader, and how quickly what you say, think, or do becomes not only your business, but the business of your whole community. I have a friend who began his ministry as a young, single man, living in the manse across the street from the church he served. Anytime he had a guest over, his parishioners would interview him about whose car was in the driveway. It put a lot of pressure on what should have been just some curious exploration in his young dating life.

John Calvin believed Nicodemus was more than curious— Calvin was convinced that Nicodemus was a *closeted* follower of Jesus. As a religious leader, he could not publicly reveal where his heart leaned; at least, not yet, because there was so much divisiveness among Jews about what to think of Jesus. John Calvin believed Nicodemus was an actual disciple of Jesus, though a secretive one, and so Calvin called all those in France who belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, but had a secret stirring towards the Protestant church, Nicodemites, for they were secretly disciples who acted out of fear of the Roman Catholic authorities<sup>2</sup>. Whether Nicodemus was actually a follower of Jesus, or just Christ-curious, we do not see Nicodemus able to risk his position and power and risk being able to be made new, born of the Spirit.

But it seems Jesus' question continued to tug at Nicodemus. Nicodemus continued to quietly support, maybe even love Jesus— but not boldly so. At an early attempt to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus argued before the Sanhedrin against arresting Jesus, because they did not give Jesus a fair trial, as Torah requires. Still, he argued under the cover of the law, rather than taking a heartfelt stand in support of Jesus. And after Jesus was crucified, Nicodemus showed up with Joseph of Arimathea to help carry Jesus' body from cross to the tomb, along with 100 pounds of myrrh and aloe to anoint Jesus' body. I don't know much about ancient burial practices, but **100 pounds** of spices sounds to me like *a lot*. Perhaps such an expensive and indulgent offering smelled of regret.

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<sup>2</sup> Randall C. Zachman, "Theological Perspective: John 3:1-17" in *Feasting on the Word Year B Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost*

Isaiah, when he heard the question coming from that great and mysterious presence in the Temple, “Whom shall I send, and whom shall go for us?” Isaiah responded, without hesitation, “Here I am! Send me!”

Nicodemus showed more reticence. He had not publicly giving Jesus his whole heart; he had not risked the new birth offered from the Spirit.

For Nicodemus, though, it was not too late. Because God shows up in the three persons of the Trinity, God is not bound by one time or location to be found, or to find us. In the three persons of the Trinity, God continues to seek us out, claim us, and make us new.

“When we profess the Trinity, we affirm that it is of the essence of God to be in relationship.”<sup>3</sup> When a prism is held up to the light, it divides the light into different colors, and they dance, casting rainbows on the spaces around them. It’s not that the light is any different, but the prism bends the light so that our human eyes can see the different colors that make up the light. The doctrine of the Trinity is like a prism. It takes the light of God—the Creator who spoke in the earliest of times, “*Let there be light,*” and helps us to see the many facets of God. As Christians, we see three in particular: God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. An experience of being born of the Spirit might dazzle us with the ability to see the holy in everything. And because God so loved the world, God showed up for us in Jesus, bringing together flesh and spirit, and showing us that the holy can dwell in us, too. Holy, holy, holy! Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh! What was once set apart is now our birthmark. Just as the seraph once touched the young prophet Isaiah’s lips with a hot burning coal so that he could preach God’s word, so have we who have been born of the Spirit been marked by the waters of new and holy birth.

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<sup>3</sup> Judith McDaniel, “Homiletical Perspective: John 3:1-17” in *Feasting on the Word Year B Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost*