



SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*A Lent 2, John 3:1-17
St. Mark's, Little Rock, 3-12-17
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While in seminary I went over to Jonesborough TN one October
to attend the National Storytelling Festival.
While there I heard all kinds of all kinds of stories and storytellers.
Some made me laugh
Some made me think
Some inspired me.
There were ghost stories
Midnight cabaret stories
Homecoming stories
Growing up stories
And tall tales.
If it had anything to do with being human--
there was somebody telling a story about it.
And I remember thinking
that if could just learn some of these wonderful stories
maybe I really could be a preacher someday.
And so before I left there
I went over to the big circus tent
where all of the storybooks
were for sale
and I started to fill my shopping bag
with collections of stories.
I was like a man on a mission.
And I pursued that mission
as though the answer that I needed
was going to be found in those books.

But while I was filling my tote bag
the strangest thing happened to me
it was as though a voice inside me said.

(And to this day
I don't know if it was God
Or my conscience
Or my ego
Or what?

A voice inside me said
"The stories aren't in the those books,
The stories are in you."

Genuine spirituality it seems
has to come from somewhere else
--not from a book
and not from a literal world
or a black and white world
apparently it has to be born
in the struggles of a person's soul.

Nicodemous in this gospel reading
Is about to make a similar discovery.

Now Nicodemous is a good Pharisee
a teacher of the law.

And if he had lived in our time
who knows he'd probably be serving on the vestry
Or teaching Sunday school
Or ushering
Or maybe just getting out of seminary.

Nicodemous you see has mastered all 613 laws in the Torah
Like the proverbial trees in the forest
He has seen every tree
And yet somehow
he has never seen the forest.

And so Nicodemus in the evening
under cover of darkness
goes to see Jesus
Intuitively somehow Nicodemus knows
that what he really needs in life
is going to be found
when he goes to Jesus.

But at the same time
 He's apparently afraid or anxious or worried
 about what is going to happen--
 Much like we may be
 On our own spiritual path--
We don't know when we step out in faith
 whether anyone is going to be there or not.
Or much like us
 when we're in a place in our lives
 that we've never been before.
 We don't know what's going to happen
And neither does Nicodemus
 He doesn't even whether Jesus will even see him or not
But when he arrives
 Jesus is there
 And he does not turn him away
Just as Jesus still promises
 I will never turn anyone away
 who believes in me.
Do you believe that?
 Nicodemus nods his head.
But Jesus says
 Nicodemus,
 No one can see the Kingdom of God
 unless he is born from above.
And no one can enter the kingdom of God
 Without being born of water
 and spirit
The wind blows where it chooses
 You hear the sound of it
 But you do not know where it comes from
 Or where it goes
 So it is with everyone born of the spirit
How can these things be?
 Nicodemus asks
 Jesus replies
 Are you a teacher of Israel
 And yet you do not understand these things?

And the truth is
He does not
Nicodemus does not understand any of these things.
Nicodemus is like us
because my hunch is
Nicodemus has spent much of his life trying to being in control
Trying to check all the boxes
Trying to meet the expectations of others
Trying to meet the expectations of society
Maybe even trying to be perfect
And trying desperately to understand things
Until finally
In the presence of Jesus
In the presence of God
Nicodemus realizes
there are some things
that he never will understand.
And many things in life that he simply cannot control
In fact, when it comes to most things
Nicodemus realizes he is powerless
Nicodemus is like an infant
Waiting to be born
And yet in that infancy
like millions of people have discovered since
though he is powerless
there is nevertheless
a higher power
a living presence
who loves him.
And Like the mystery of a wind
A mysterious presence who loves him In spite of all his mistakes
all his shortcomings
and all his sins
And that believing in him
Nicodemus finds new life
life in his name.

For God did not send his Son to condemn the word
But rather to save it
And that all who believe in Him
would not perish
But have everlasting life
--Eternal life
And have a life with the quality of eternity even now.
This week is our second mark of God's mission in the world
--that is to teach, baptize, and nurture new believers.
And this mark is part
of what God seeks to do
through each of us.
But like that teacher of Israel of long ago
none of us can teach what we have not learned
or guide someone to a place
that we have never been.
And so perhaps the most important thing about being a teacher
Is that you and I must also be students.
For the answers we seek
Won't always found in a book
Or a Bible study
Or liturgy
Or the outward trappings of the church
But rather right here
Inside each one of you
In the struggles of your own soul
Through trust in God
And the one
who is ready to be born.