

“Zoom”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
Trinity Sunday – 7 June 2009
Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

Nicodemus was a good man. He had risen to the top of his field, serving as a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest council of Judaism. Later on in the Gospel of John, we learn that Nicodemus took up for Jesus in this council, arguing that he be treated fairly, which earned Nicodemus the scorn of his colleagues. Near the end of John’s gospel, he reappears, helping Joseph of Arimathea provide Jesus with a proper burial by bringing 100 pounds of expensive ointment to prepare the body for its tomb. Yet in today’s passage from chapter three, Nicodemus is quite simply clueless.

We don’t know why Nicodemus sought Jesus out, though it appears he did so tentatively, skulking around at night, probably to protect his reputation. His conversation with Jesus is comic, almost farcical. Here we receive a biblical account of the dangers of literalism. Jesus speaks of the need to be born anew, and Nicodemus inquires how somebody can crawl back into their mother’s womb. He sounds pathetically thick, despite his intimate knowledge of scripture.

What afflicted Nicodemus, however, was not lack of knowledge or intelligence, and he certainly had some measure of curiosity and courage just to seek Jesus out. No, Nicodemus lacked the one thing that any follower of God must possess to a certain degree, a sense of imagination. When Jesus insisted on the importance of being born anew, he referred to a spiritual transformation, not a repeat of our biological entrance into the world. Somehow Nicodemus missed the meaning of what Jesus was telling him, and since he wasn’t stupid or

poorly educated, the only reason he didn't "get it" must have been a deficit of imagination. He literally could not see, with his mind's eye, the reality Jesus was trying to describe.

So Jesus tried a different metaphor to bring Nicodemus on board. In verse eight, Jesus says, "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." This evidently didn't help much either, because Nicodemus replies, "How can these things be?" His earnest question earns him a stern rebuke from Jesus: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" Perhaps it was precisely **because** Nicodemus was a supreme scholar, trained to read and think in a certain way, that he could not see the newness, the radical change that Jesus embodied.

Of course, we cannot presume to stand in judgment over Nicodemus, regardless of his faults and failings, because there's a little Nicodemus in all of us. Like him, we often approach Jesus cautiously, full of trepidation, hiding our interest in Jesus in the shadows where no one else can see. Once we find Jesus, our imagination frequently fails us, and we are left bewildered by what we experience. In the company of those who would destroy Jesus, our feeble voice raised in protest proves too little; our compassion at the grave after the deed has been done, too late. This is particularly true of the council that resides between our ears and behind our belly buttons, the council of our conscience.

The good news, both for Nicodemus and for us, is that the wind blows where it chooses – the wind, by the way, being one way to translate the Greek word *pneuma*, as in pneumonia or pneumatic drill. The other way to bring that word into English is Spirit, which is what Jesus was talking about with Nicodemus. Just as we cannot tell the wind which way to blow, so also the Spirit of God will move about as it will, which is delightful and disconcerting at the same time.

This characteristic of the Spirit means that we are not in control, which feels threatening, and the implication of the Spirit's freedom is that it's a good thing we're not in control, which humbles us. But it can also be a tremendous relief to let go of the notion that we are always in complete and total control of our lives in this world. Heavy lies the crown, as they say.

We rightly fear the Spirit, as we do the wind. Both have tremendous power at their disposal. Witness the mighty trees that still lay around from the hurricane that blew through here several years ago. Consider the beautiful mesas and plateaus of the American Southwest and remember that it was the wind that acted as the primary sculptor, eroding over centuries tons of dust – a process that will likely continue until those huge plinths exist no more. Whether the wind comes with ferocity or persistent gentleness, the outcome is the same: the wind moves, and as it moves, the wind – the Spirit – moves much of what it meets to a different place.

Just imagine if you will that a speck of sand lifted by the wind from its lofty perch on the side of a mesa in New Mexico. The view, no doubt, had been thrilling, but much the same for most of this speck's lifetime, and located in a desert that was barren despite its mysterious beauty. Who knows where that speck landed next? Maybe in a field on the Great Plains it combined with countless other specks of soil, which together had the satisfaction to nourish a garden that produced vegetables for the feeding and enjoyment of people. Perhaps that speck got picked up again by the wind, this time into the heights of our atmosphere, where it became the core around which a raindrop formed, until its weight became so great that down it fell thousands of feet onto the parched soil of a farmer's fertile land in western Virginia. Who would deprive this tiny speck of sand its adventure, chosen not by itself, but advanced persistently through wind and water?

Likewise, with us, the wind of the Spirit, combined with the waters of baptism, will in its good time lift us up and possibly carry us away, physically or spiritually or both, to places we never imagined, to places where we can be of some use. As the band, Kansas, so poignantly points out, “Dust in the wind, all we are is dust in the wind.” Just as the wind moves the soil, so the Spirit moves our souls: in ways we may not intend, for reasons we may not readily see. And yet the threat of being moved is so far surpassed by the joy of it, we would be fools not to pray fervently for a stiff breeze from God, for the Spirit to move through and pick us up and take us on an adventure that will lead who knows where.

It isn't as if there is anyone here who is a stranger to this, although when it's happened in the past, we might not have been paying close attention, or we might have decided, somewhat stupidly, that we made the trip under our own power. What it takes to notice the Spirit moving is nothing more or less than the sense of imagination that comes naturally to a small child, an imagination full of wonder and awe and limitless possibility: quirky, peculiar, and highly impractical. “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God,” wrote Paul in his Letter to the Romans. It takes a momentary suspension of our sophisticated disbelief, a pause in our self-confidence, an abdication of control, to see the Spirit whisk by and feel it lift us up and whirl us away.

In the process, the Spirit will take our breath away, because above all, it is our very life that the Spirit seeks. But for all that it takes, the Spirit gives more, infinitely more than we could ask or imagine. Indeed, we must die to our old selves to be reborn anew, and as we breathe our last, the Spirit enters and inspires a fresh life unlike the old. We can choose this or reject it, but the Spirit moves on her own initiative. So once we choose, we are left to hope and wait and pray.

This is so much to get our minds around that we may be tempted to hesitate, or even withdraw from the reach of the Spirit, but therein lay the struggle Nicodemus suffered. He tried to understand how it all works, but when you're dealing with a holy mystery, it won't do to just think. Only doing will do. Once you've experienced it, you've got something to think about, but until then, you're on the outside looking in, and you're peering through a window heavily tinted by doubt and fear, a window veritably designed for misperception, so that you must imagine what's within, and eagerly desire it, despite everything you don't know about it. That's the life of faith: definitely not for the fainthearted, but if you're ready to soar . . . Amen.