

“A Faith that Will See You Through”

John 3:1-17

April 10, 2016

W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

Today we are talking about faith. The writer of Hebrews said it best when he wrote, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Heb. 11:1) Faith is the assurance of things hoped for: the hope was real among the Hebrew people that God would do something new for them. That God would send a messiah, a son of David, someone who would free them from their self-imposed slavery from the boot of Rome and restore their glory days.

Let’s explore that idea of hope and faith in one of the best chapters in all the Bible. I would be hard pressed to name another chapter that has a better message than John 3. Out of the mouth of Jesus and from the pen of John tumble the words, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that you and I may not perish but may have eternal life.” Wow! What a startling statement about God, love and about us.

But let’s go back to the beginning of the chapter. In the very first verse we are introduced to a man named Nicodemus who it says was a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews. Most of the time the Pharisees get a bad press in the Bible. They are often thought of as mean, opinionated old men who argue with Jesus, the enemy, really; but look around this sanctuary this morning. Look at the folk sitting in front of you and behind you and look up here in the pulpit. We are the Pharisees. The people in our day who are seekers after religion are the Pharisees. The ones who try hard to live and understand the faith.

The Pharisees had their secret rites. They did little things when they were initiated, like some of you might have done if you joined a secret society. They had to promise that they would uphold every point of the Jewish law. Every jot and tittle had to be carefully followed. The jot is the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet and carried over into English in phrases like “I will jot that down” referring to a short or small note or phrase. The tittle is literally the dot over the letter “i” or is also what the dots on a pair of dice are called. So the Pharisees followed every little part even the smallest part of the law letting nothing go to chance. Every jot and tittle had to carefully followed. And you could begin to feel the sense of belonging and the pride. That’s the way the Pharisees were. They might have had their secrets but they were people of faith. There were six thousand of them in the land. And, if you ever wanted a job done well for a charity, for the Red Cross, or the Salvation Army or the Presbytery, or whoever, you went to a Pharisee. Nicodemus was a Pharisee.

You would have liked Nicodemus. You would be proud to have him in the church. Pretend he is the Chair of the Board of the Company, or the President of the University.

Then look what happens next in our story. It says he went out alone one night to listen to a roadside evangelist from Nazareth. I wonder why he went at night? I mean, perhaps he was afraid to go by day; maybe someone would see him go; or maybe he just loved to worship in the

evening. Or, maybe Nicodemus came by night because he worked all day. A busy man does not slip out in the middle of the working day to hear an evangelist. Night time can mean a lot of things.

I smile at a guy in his three piece vested suit, tiptoeing out to listen to a roadside preacher, who is shouting, “You must be baptized in the water, and the blood of the lamb.” He waits around until the service is over, so that he can talk to the preacher. Why do you think he did it? Why do you think he would do such a thing?

I know why he did it. We can guess anyway! Something was missing in his life. The way I see it is that they (those who have something missing) have a great big hole right in the center. They have everything on earth that anyone could ever ask for or need; and yet when you look at them, you know they are empty inside. They chase after the wind and they fight themselves, and you want to pray for them to fill the emptiness. They never quite get hold of it.

Now, as the story continues, we learn something else about Nicodemus. He is a pretty good politician. I mean you don’t get to high places without knowing the right thing to say. I bet he never did a “perfectly polished” course, but do you recall the first thing he said when he finally got a chance to talk to the evangelist? “I hear you are pretty good! Teacher, we have seen you do some impressive things, like turning that lime punch into Mogen David last Saturday night during the wedding over at Cana. I must add in violation of church rules about alcohol in the fellowship hall. And then Nicodemus moves in with the question he really wants to ask, the question that you might want to ask Jesus, “Teacher, how do you get into the kingdom of God? What do you have to do to get whatever it is you have?”

Jesus replies, “I have three things that I want to say about that. Point one: You have to be born from above to see the kingdom. Point two: You have got to get the Spirit. Point three: The wind blows where it will.”

That was Jesus. Ask him a simple question like, “What have I got to do to get what you have?” and he answers with parables, with talk about birth, spirit and wind.

Nicodemus comes in from the dark, from the night, seeking light. “What have I got to do? How is it possible?” And Jesus replies with surprise images, birth and wind. You want to get into the kingdom? Simple. Just be born from above.

“Well, how can you do that? Can you teach an old dog new tricks? Can you squeeze back into your mother’s womb and be born a second time?” Jesus says, “You can squeeze yourself back into your mother’s womb about as easily as you can squeeze yourself into the kingdom. You must be born, not again, but from above. The Greek word is *anōthen* which means “from above” or “from top to the bottom.” It is the same word that was used on Good Friday when it was said that the veil of the temple was torn *anōthen*, ‘from the top to the bottom.’ Nicodemus, you have got to be born from above, from the top down, from top to bottom.

But as so often happens in John’s gospel, somebody hears, but doesn’t hear. When Jesus first said born from “above,” Nick thought he heard him say, “again.” How can you be born a second

time? “No,” Jesus says, “Turn up your hearing aid. It’s born from above.” Anothen. Let’s say it together, anothen!

Isn’t it interesting that when people talk about this passage today they often make the same mistake that Nick made? They say, “You must be born again.” No! Jesus said, “You must be born from above. Flesh is flesh. But Spirit is spirit.” What God wants to do with you is a renovation involving an attic-to-basement renovation involving an attic-to-basement overhaul. Top to bottom. Anothen.

Well, how? You do it the same way that you got born. What did you have to do to get born, Nick? “Well, I was just floating along and then I just got pushed out....”

“Right! Getting into the kingdom is a lot like that, only more so, top to bottom, anothen.” Well, how? “Like wind. The wind blows where it will. You don’t know from whence it comes. You don’t know where it goes. You can’t control it, predict it, harness it. Ask the golfers down at Augusta this weekend which direction the wind is coming from? They will say, “Every way it can come.” Getting into my kingdom, Jesus said, is a lot like that, only more so, pneuma.”

“Jesus, did you say pneuma in the ordinary sense of ‘wind’ or pneuma in the theological sense of ‘spirit’?” Jesus replied, “Yes.”

Do you find it interesting that when Nicodemus asked “how” Jesus responded by citing two of the most mysterious, uncontrollable events in life? Birth. Wind.

How? What did you do to get born? If it were a matter of how—a technique, a method—Jesus wouldn’t have called it birth, wouldn’t have named it wind.

How? God so loved the world that God gave. Can you say Charis, gift, Nicodemus? “Did you say charis in the ordinary sense of ‘gift’ or charis in the more theologically sophisticated sense of ‘grace’?” Jesus replied, “Yes.”

Nicodemus replied, “I don’t understand.” And Jesus said, “Now, you’re catching on.” You must be born from above.” By the way, the ‘you’ is in the plural. Jesus was from Georgia. Ya’ll must be born from above.

Now, some of you may be sitting there thinking, “I wonder what he is going to say next? Is he going to tell me I have to be born from top to bottom?” Some of you might be a little anxious listening, right? Well, I get kind of scared myself, too, to tell you the truth. You can smile if you want, unless it makes you cry. Because often you know everything on earth except the one thing we need to know.

Nicodemus, have you not ever figured out that faith begins with trust? Nicodemus said, “I am a teacher all right, but I have never figured this out. I was a star student in the school for Pharisees, but I always led with my mind, not my emotions. If I could not prove it logically I never was able to accept it.

Let me close with a story that a friend shared with me. It happened down in the Orange Bowl stadium in Miami, not for a football game but for a swearing in ceremony of new American citizens. They had gathered some nine thousand people along with their families and their friends to become American citizens. At that time it was the largest group ever naturalized at one time in the history of our nation. There were all kinds of people there: different races, and nationalities. Some could not speak English. Some were old and some were young. Some were dressed in suits and some in blue jeans. What a marvelous group! What was going on was this, before the proper authorities, they renounced any and all allegiance to wherever and whatever it was they belonged to before, for the high privilege and calling of belonging to these United States of America. They said, "My homeland is not my homeland anymore. My homeland is here. I take this opening step."

That is what Nicodemus found that night. Because he became a follower. He pleaded for Jesus halfway through the Gospel. And he was one of the last ones there at the end to take proper care of the man they thought they had killed, but who lives forevermore. The Pharisee switched his allegiance, "belonged" to something, someone new.

So that leaves but a word or two for you and me. Nicodemus discovered what he already knew, but now it became his soul, not his lecture. From above, God had touched his life.

Just so that you do know, your faith begins in the awareness that God has a purpose and a meaning for your life, that he loves you enough to claim you as his child, his very own. To be born from above means mainly that you allow the claim, accept the offer and know the love of Christ for you, for now and evermore. It really is a simple matter—to what or to whom do you belong! God bless you everyone.