



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR B, MAY 30, 2021
ISAIAH 6:1-8; PSALM 29; ROMANS 8:12-17; JOHN 3:1-17

YOU KNOW THIS

We ask, *"How can these things be?"*

Jesus asks, *"How can you not know this?"*

Ahhhh.... We hear this story today of the Pharisee Nicodemus, and we have some antipathy for him because he's a Pharisee, and our lens tends to read ALL Pharisees as hypocrites and antagonists of Jesus. Still, we also cut Nicodemus a little slack, because although he's a Pharisee, he does come to Jesus recognizing Jesus is a teacher sent by God, and there are things he wants to learn. But then, we have contempt for Nicodemus because he's so dense, he doesn't understand what Jesus is telling him about the Spirit. We stand there asking, "How can you not know this," too!

Or... just maybe... a little part of us isn't SO contemptuous, but is, a little bit abashedly, standing right there with him, looking at

Jesus with wide eyes, as Nicodemus asks: *How can these things be?*

Our understanding of our life in the Spirit, like Nicodemus's, is, usually unconsciously, constrained by the culture and time and circumstances we live in. We may be condescending about Nicodemus's Pharisaical understanding of the world and the law. But in our time, in this material culture, a culture with so many ways we divide ourselves and "other" each other, we too can find ourselves having trouble accepting what Jesus says. Because there's so much we don't understand, either. *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.*

There is mystery. And we're not generally comfortable with mystery – because... isn't certainty *better?! Nicodemus, as a Pharisee –*

and some bible translations name him a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council – he would be an expert in the Law and the Prophets. He would be certain about every letter of the law, with strict observance of both written law and the traditions that had been passed down. Certainty mattered.

And the Gospels are full of people wanting certainty. I think about the rich young man who asks Jesus what he must do to have eternal life, and Jesus says, “You know the commandments,” and the man presses, “I have kept these,” but he wants to be acknowledged and be certain, and so Jesus says, “Sell what you have, give to the poor, and follow me” – and the man goes away sad, because he had many things. Certainty wasn’t as attractive as he expected when he was sure he could “just” follow the laws.

And so, too, the Pharisees who were affronted by Jesus’ healing the paralyzed man: John’s Gospel says they started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath – and they were *certain* that Sabbath work was prohibited by law. An Orthodox website today describes 39 categories of Sabbath work prohibited by law.¹ These Pharisees would have been certain of every such detail and then some.

So are all those details certain, or not certain? If it’s *not* certain, how could their authority be as absolute as they held it to be? That’s a problem! Certainty gives authority. Certainty makes rigidity. Certainty upholds categories. Certainty also helps us feel safe – to exert some control in a world full of chaos. *We* can

become too attached to being certain about our teachings and outlooks, too. But Jesus breaks into the certainty of mere law and talks of being born in the Spirit. When Nicodemus is astonished, Jesus says to the man of religion: *How can you not know this?*

The Johannine scholar Sandra Schneiders points out what marginalized communities have long known and lived, that “those who are privileged by any social system tend to see that system and its products as self-evidently total and adequate. But those who have been marginalized by the system can see its inadequacies precisely because it does not include them.”² Sound familiar in today’s America? And Jesus was among – and beside – those the system did not and does not include, showing us what transformation in the Spirit looks like on the ground: feeding, healing, forgiving, listening, including.

Jesus asks Nicodemus how he can be a learned teacher of Israel but not understand what the Spirit is up to. And for us, doesn’t being born in the Spirit mean a transformation of heart and mind and soul? Doesn’t everything Jesus does upend buying into the systems of privilege of the world for bringing us into the kingdom of God? We tend to automatically think Jesus is talking about heaven, but heaven was already fine!

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. We are trained to hear – and some have weaponized and wielded these words – as a purely eschatological statement about right belief

getting you into heaven! Jesus came to change the world – THIS WORLD – and did it in among the marginalized and excluded. *God so loved the world.*

Nicodemus was astonished at this language of the Spirit, but it's the Spirit that prodded him, as it prods us, to seek out Jesus, even if Nicodemus went under cover of darkness for fear of censure from the social system of religious power that he was privileged by. And transformation in the presence of Jesus was going to happen! We see Nicodemus with Jesus two more times in Scripture: reminding the Pharisees that under Jewish law, Jesus should be granted a hearing before he's condemned, and then, ultimately, this man who first had come to Jesus under cover of darkness brings 100 lbs. of myrrh and aloe to assist in Jesus' burial.

Transformed in the presence of Jesus.

Are we Christians people of religious systems or are we Jesus people transformed in the Spirit? We certainly can be both – I say with prayer as I stand here in my collar – but religion is tamer than the Spirit – even religions that get crazed in their rules are tamer than the Spirit. You never know when the wind of the Spirit is going to be a hurricane! Listen to Nicodemus' first anguished confusion: *How can these things be?*"

But even wilder: you never know when the wind of the Spirit is going to be a whisper, and YOU DON'T WANT TO MISS THAT. Despite our systems, and our clawing for

certainly, as author Sara Miles writes, "None of us can control what God does. But we can open our eyes and see what God is doing."³

That's how being born of the SPIRIT changes everything. *That* is what God is doing! We give up our need to prescribe our own certainty, our need to be boundaried and bordered. We are held in something deeper. And this is Jesus asking us, as Christians, "*How can you not know this?*" And so he tells Nicodemus, and he tell us, this is the love of *God so loved the world.*

KNOW that we are born of the Spirit into that expansive kind of love, a new world, the kingdom of God. *That's* the certainty to have. That's why this is such a powerful Gospel reading for today, Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is mystery that we can't make concrete and certain. Poetry and metaphor may come closest, when we think of this divinity as a community of self-giving love. It is a love that we are invited into by Godself, as our Creator; as Jesus in our own flesh; as the Spirit who is with us and within us.

God created humankind in God's own image (Genesis 1), and the Trinitarian God who made us is about *relationship*. So we are made in the image of self-giving, loving relationship. We may be more comfortable with a God whose image looks just like me – and not like YOU – and we may be more comfortable with rules, even rules we chafe at, because we can huddle in certainty there, and keep other people outside.

The God who is relationship is harder. But isn't loving relationship better? Isn't relationship true wildness AND our true shelter? Lord, if there's anything this year-plus of quarantine and isolation made so clear... it surely is that.

Systems and teachings will never adequately describe the relational Trinitarian God, but

the Spirit moves us into that self-giving loving relationship with Godself – and with each other. *How can these things be?*

The God who so loves the world answers, *"You know this."*

¹

https://www.ou.org/holidays/the_thirty_nine_categories_of_sabbath_work_prohibited_by_law/

² Sandra Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993, p. 124.

³ Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010, p. 11.

John 3:1-17 [There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.]