

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
2nd Sunday in Lent  
March 12, 2017

## Life Beyond Comprehension

John 3:1-21

The published title of this sermon today is “Life Beyond Comprehension,”  
but I’ll let you in on a little secret about sermon titles:  
about 8 times out of 10,  
I decide on those sermon titles before I’ve actually written the sermon!  
Now, I’ve studied the passage and wrestled with it, sometimes mightily,  
before I decide on a basic focus for the sermon,  
and a title.  
But the actual writing, the fleshing out of the sermon,  
doesn’t usually happen until Friday afternoon  
or more often than not, early Saturday morning.

So with a sermon title like “Life Beyond Comprehension,”  
you might get the sense that the sermon itself was still beyond comprehension  
at the time the bulletin was printed.

Looking back at 22 years of old sermons,  
I have preached at least 6 sermons on this familiar 3rd chapter of John.  
So, you might ask, why not just pull out one of those previous 6 sermons?  
Well, sometimes that works,  
but here’s the thing about old sermons:

**The Word of God is living and active,  
always speaking a fresh word for a new day,  
always being carried along on a breeze,  
or sometimes a gale-force wind,  
that’s blowing through our lives in a particular direction.**

It may be that what we have heard from a passage of scripture in the past,  
was precisely the Word God was speaking to us then,  
but God may have a new word to speak to us today.  
That is to say,  
our understanding of the scripture, our comprehension of what God is saying,  
is never a settled matter,  
but is always open to rearrangement by the fresh winds of the Spirit.

In fact, this is exactly what Nicodemus discovers  
in his encounter with Jesus on a breezy rooftop,  
in the middle of the night.

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Today, we begin a series of sermons from the Gospel of John that will continue for the remaining Sundays of Lent. The series will reflect on the “Encounters with Jesus” experienced by some of the more famous characters in John’s Gospel:  
Nicodemus  
The Samaritan Woman at the Well  
The Man Born Blind  
And, finally, the three siblings, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Many of you will be even more familiar with these well-known stories because, as a congregation, we’ve been spending a good bit of time in the Gospel of John over the past year. In an Adult Church School class, as well as the Tuesday Morning Breakfast Study, and Table Talk every first Tuesday night at the Community Tap.

It is perhaps appropriate that we would spend time with John around the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, since the Fourth Gospel was hailed as the favorite gospel of both Luther and Calvin.

Luther, who tended toward exuberance and often rather overstated his case, called John’s Gospel “the one, fine, true, and chief gospel... far, far to be preferred over the other three and placed high above them.”

But even Calvin, who was a good bit more nuanced than Luther, also wrote, “I am accustomed to say that this Gospel is a key to open the door for understanding the rest; for whoever shall understand the power of Christ, as it is here strikingly portrayed, will afterwards read with advantage what the others relate about the Redeemer...”

The Gospel of John is fascinating for many reason, but especially for one particular paradox: One the one hand, the divinity of Jesus is more strikingly portrayed in John than in the Synoptic Gospels; but on the other hand, we encounter Jesus in a more up-close-and-personal way in John. This is partly because “Jesus talks constantly in John.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, it has been said of John’s Jesus: “Wordy is the Lamb!” If you have one of those red-letter editions of the Bible, you’ll see more red in John than in the other three gospels.

John’s “language is simple and elegant, yet plumbs astonishing depths.” It has been described as a book in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim.<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel of John portrays Jesus in a way that resonated as deeply authentic to the early church, thus the inclusion of John in the Christian scriptures.

But John clearly also reflects the particular concerns of the community for which he wrote in about 100 AD, a community of Jewish Christians who had been expelled from the synagogue because of their profession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

In each of these Encounters with Jesus, we see reflections of the struggles of this early Christian community, even as we hear a Word from God that speaks with power to the human condition in any age.

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Nicodemus's encounter with Jesus clearly reflects the issues of John's community, but it goes beyond these historically rooted concerns to speak powerfully to us today.

For starters, Nicodemus expresses his bewilderment with Jesus, the same bewilderment expressed in our Prayer of Confession this morning, that sometimes we don't understand a word Jesus is saying.

Nicodemus expresses more than just his own, personal bewilderment.

He doesn't say, "Rabbi, I know..." but rather, "Rabbi, we know..."

**Nicodemus gives voice to the befuddlement of his whole tribe, the community of the Pharisees, who gradually grow more and more agitated in the Gospel of John, by the things Jesus is saying about himself.**

Whatever wind of the Spirit is blowing through Jerusalem, it is upsetting the carefully settled arrangements of the religious leaders.

N.T. Wright has said the movement of the Holy Spirit is

"like a fresh spring breeze...

and no human family, tribe, organization or system can keep up with it.

Opening the window and letting the breeze in

can be very inconvenient,

especially for the Nicodemuses of this world

who suppose they have got things tidied up, labelled and sorted into neat piles."<sup>3</sup>

Remember that the prologue to the Gospel of John in the first chapter tells us,

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

But that verse may also be translated,

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it, ...or understand it.*

So it matters that Nicodemus comes to Jesus **by night**.

There are very few extraneous details in John. Almost everything means something.

**And John means to say that Nicodemus is coming to Jesus from a place of spiritual darkness,**

**with an inability to see, or to understand, or to comprehend  
the light and life Jesus is offering to the world.**

Jesus is speaking of Nicodemus and his tribe of Pharisees  
when he says

*This is the judgement, that the light has come into the world,  
and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.  
For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light,  
so that their deeds may not be exposed.  
But those who do what is true come to the light...*

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Is he “doing what is true” on this night by coming to the light?  
Or does he remain in the darkness?

And what about us?

We are drawn to Jesus  
because his light beckons to us in our own darkness,  
and we approach his light,  
but then we find it inaccessible, incomprehensible.

We want to capture the light,  
like a firefly in a jar,  
but the light who enlightens everyone  
eludes our grasp,  
and will not be confined to our settled arrangements.

Jesus says to Nicodemus,

*‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’*

Nicodemus objects,

*‘How can anyone be born after having grown old?  
Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’*

Jesus answers,

*‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God  
without being born of water and Spirit.’*

For Nicodemus and his religious community

being born into the right family mattered!

Being born as a child of Abraham was the basis of everything the Jews believed.

It gave them their identity, their status, their choseness, their hope.

But Jesus is shaking up these categories.

To belong to the kingdom of God,

one must be *born again*, or *born anew*, or *born from above*.

Or more explicitly, *born of water and the Spirit*,

which is most likely a reference to baptism —

**a double baptism,**

one with water, that is a very public proclamation to the community  
that a person now professes allegiance to the kingdom-movement

led first by John the Baptist, and now by Jesus;  
and a spiritual baptism,  
a new life bubbling up inside a person  
as the Holy Spirit works miracles of life within the heart.

In other words, Jesus says,  
for a person to experience this new and eternal life in the heart,  
one must profess and live out this new life in the light of day,  
in a public and social way that is seen by others,  
by becoming a part of the visible community of disciples.

For both Nicodemus, and for John's community in 100 AD,  
this was a dangerous move to make,  
which would result in being ostracized, at best,  
or even stoned or crucified.

Unlike our situation here in Greenville, SC, on the buckle of the Bible Belt,  
a profession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God  
would have been "to undertake an act of deliberate downward mobility."

Or perhaps there are ways, even in Greenville,  
that public Christian commitment results in downward mobility?  
It seems the culture of Christian worship and the culture of youth athletics  
seem to be at cross purposes,  
not to mention the culture of weekend leisure and recreation.

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So where do you connect with Nicodemus?  
Do you sympathize with his bewilderment? His doubts? His fears?

If we are honest,  
we know ourselves to be living very much, very often, in the dark.  
We are drawn to the light,  
but we come to Jesus by night, unsure of just how much commitment  
we are ready to make.

Even if we have made the commitment to be here today  
we will very likely find our hearts resistant to God's word within us;  
we will find ourselves frantically reaching here and there to hold in place  
the arrangements we have made  
that are in danger of being blown into disarray  
by the winds of the Spirit.

But if this is where you find yourself,  
the Gospel of John brings **good news** to you  
**because the story of Nicodemus does not end here in the 3rd chapter.**

Later in John,  
it is Nicodemus who speaks up among his peers  
insisting that Jesus deserves to be accorded due process of law.

And Nicodemus reappears later in the company of Joseph of Arimathea,  
who — though he is described as a “*secret*” *disciple of Jesus*  
“*because of his fear of the Jews*” —  
nonetheless asks Pilate for permission to take Jesus’ body down from the cross  
and provide for his burial.

Together with Joseph,  
Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus by night,  
now comes just before the dawn,  
and performs a public act of true devotion,  
honoring Jesus with a burial befitting a king.<sup>4</sup>

So could it be that you and I,  
hesitant as we may be,  
shrouded as we may be in the darkness of doubt and fear,  
bewildered as we may be at the words we hear Jesus speaking to us...

**...are nevertheless on a journey of toward eternal life**

**that will be realized**

**in ways we cannot yet comprehend?**

John holds out hope for us,  
and for all  
who encounter Jesus  
on the breezy, darkened rooftops of the world.

<sup>1</sup> Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) xi

<sup>2</sup> Gench, xii

<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 30.

<sup>4</sup> Gench, 28