

Sermon: Spirit Two Ways
Text: John 3:1-17
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Context: WWPC
Lent 2
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For God so loved the world . . .

John 3:16a

There was a time in my life, way back in the day, when I was in love with ambiguity. Unfortunately, this time corresponded to when I was training for the ministry.

I was not alone. A bunch of my classmates were excited about it, too. We felt like we were the first seminarians ever to feel this way, like the first time you fall in love as teenager, like we had discovered some secret magic that no one else knew about.

I would learn this specific language later (and I would learn it from my wife, and the work she does), but at the time we intuitively realized we lived in a VUCA world: Variable, Uncertain, Complex and, yes, Ambiguous.

So here was our revelatory insight: we would preach sermons that would be less focused on helping our congregants make sense of such a world, or to navigate its many spiritual and emotional complexities.

Rather if the world is variable, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, and it indisputably is, then we would preach sermons that were themselves a little complex, a little uncertain.

Sermons that were, yes, a little ambiguous. (And if they varied in quality, well, that was on us.)

The genius of this plan, or so we thought, was that preaching sermons that raised more questions than answers, preaching sermons that deliberately left the waters a little bit murky, well, these would make our congregants think.

Leaving our listeners with a little work to do when they left the sanctuary -- work centered around trying to figure out what we had just said, and how it pertained to the world outside of the doors to the sanctuary, well, this would help build up our members' spiritual and intellectual muscles.

It would make our congregations stronger and more prepared to meet the challenges that face them out in the real world, in all its VUCA glory.

So how did this work out, you may be wondering.

Well, after many years of ministry, here is a pro-level tip that I would offer to anyone contemplating a similar approach in their preaching: that is a terrible idea.

Actually, it did not take many years to learn this lesson. I believe it took precisely one sermon like that -- and the glorious opportunity, as a student intern, to receive feedback about it later from the congregants to whom I preached it, and from my supervisor. Nothing variable or ambiguous about this feedback.

This was enough to help me understand the error of my ways, and to reorient my preaching around the unambiguously Good News that God so loved the world he sent his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

Just so that you not go home wondering how someone with an IQ fractionally above average could be so dim-witted and naïve, let me say that in my defense, my classmates and I drew our inspiration from a pretty reliable source.

Because it turns out that we weren't the first people to see new possibilities in offering up our listeners stubborn ambiguities to chew on. As with most things, Jesus beat us to it.

In the original Greek, two key words in this story – *pneuma* (the word for “spirit”) and *anōthen* (the word for “again”) – have no direct English equivalents.

And the reason is that in Greek they have more than one meaning. Like “light” in English.

You can *light* a match. You can turn on a *light*. Or you can marvel at how *light* a feather is. This one word has all those meanings built into it, and we understand those meanings differently depending on the context in which it is used.

Just so, in Greek *pnuema* can mean either spirit or wind or even breath. It depends entirely on context. Similarly *anōthen* can mean from above or anew or again. You must be born anew, or you must be born from above, or you must be born again.

All of those meanings are present here. And there's no way to convey this plurality of meaning in one English word. So to determine which one should prevail in translation, we need to look at the context.

And the very first thing we'll note about that context is that it begins in darkness.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews . . . He came to Jesus by night

Nicodemus is one of the very first people in the Gospels who seek Jesus out. Ordinarily it's Jesus who does the seeking and the finding. The healing, the forgiving, the calling out for service.

But here the tables are turned. Nicodemus, a leader in the Jewish temple, comes to Jesus by night. It's how a lot of us come, of course, though we may come for different reasons.

Maybe we come in the night because, like Nicodemus, we're afraid of being found out.

We're afraid of what the neighbors will say if this persistent and unsettling hunger we feel for God is found out. If it becomes public that we went searching for Jesus, it's possible that our neighbors will group us in with the goofy guy with the rainbow afro who holds up the John 3:16 sign at the Super Bowl.

Or we come in the night because that's so often when God is found; because, oddly, it's often easier to hide our needs and our hopes and our fears in the bright light of day. But when night falls and the curtains are drawn and we're all alone, well, then there's no hiding from ourselves or from God.

In the end, we don't know why Nicodemus came to Jesus or why he came in the night. Maybe this religious professional was hungry for new life.

Maybe after all those years pouring over nothing but text he finally realized that he was hungry for something besides words. Maybe religion itself wasn't enough for him. Maybe he wanted a relationship with the living God.

Whatever his reason, it appears he gets more than he bargained for.

'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.'

And maybe that's where you stop listening. Because that phrase has been so totally coopted by a certain wing of the church that you don't identify with, and you can't even bear to hear the phrase any more.

But maybe your context, and your privilege, give you the luxury of dismissing that idea. If you feel no need to be born again, maybe that's because you've never really been broken.

Maybe you've never reached the point where you're searching for God from inside a jail cell, or on the floor of a half-way house for heroin addicts, or from the prison of shame or regret for what you've done, or failed to do as a spouse or parent or sibling or neighbor.

Maybe you've never used up your life, or burned it up, or shot it up. Never wasted it, or squandered it, such that you feel like you're dead inside and are desperate for a second chance, desperate for new life. Desperate to be born again.

If these words are ambiguous, if their meaning depends on context, put yourself in a different context and maybe then they start to make more sense.

If you've failed at your job, or you've failed in your marriage, or if you've just failed at life, then the possibility of being born again, of being born from above, of having God's spirit fill and renew you, of having a fresh wind blow through you, of having God's very breath fill your lungs, well maybe that's not just Good News, capital G, capital N, maybe that's Great News, the very thing you've been longing for, the very thing you've been waiting for, the very thing you've been dying for.

And so, like Nicodemus, you go out to meet Jesus at night. His face is lit by the soft light of the moon, the stars are dancing overhead. And he tells you that this very thing might be possible, that you can be born anew.

Okay, yes, you say to yourself! You grab onto that promise like a drowning person grabs a rope. But why me, you wonder.

And the answer comes back: *because God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life. But God doesn't just love the world and everyone in it in some global sense, God loves you, very specifically.*

If that's what happened to Nicodemus that night, if that were ever to happen to you, you can see why this story belongs in scripture, why it deserves to be remembered, why it deserves to be told and preached again and again.

But maybe that's not your jam, as the hipsters say these days. Maybe the possibility of a new start, a fresh wind, is not what you're longing for right now. You feel no need to be born again, or born from above, or born anew, because you feel like you were born just fine the first time.

That's perfectly fine. This passage is known and loved the world over. But declaring that you must be born again, and that God so loved the world, is not Jesus's stump speech.

It's not the only thing he says to everyone he meets. He says it once in all of scripture, to this one particular man, on this one particular night.

If you read on in the Gospel of John you will immediately discover that he says lots of different things to different people, depending on their context. And we will look at a few of these stories in the weeks to come...

To the woman at the well he says, *Drink living water!*

To the woman caught in adultery he writes a message in the sand so specifically for her, she is the only one who knows what he wrote.

To a little girl who has died he says, *Talitha cum! Rise up!*

To Lazarus, dead for days and wrapped up tight in the grave, he says, *Come out!*
Throw off those grave clothes!

This encounter with the living Christ is different for everyone. Sometimes he seeks us out. Sometimes we're bold enough to seek him out. Sometimes we have that encounter at night. Sometimes we have it when we're not expecting it. And sometimes we have it right here in this sanctuary.

And the answers we get are all different, because we're all different.

The only real question is what's he saying to you?