



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Taking It Back

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 16, 2014
The Second Sunday in Lent—Based on John 3:1-17*

Every three years we get the chance to preach on this gospel, which includes probably the most famous verse in the bible, John 3:16: *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.* We are reminded of it during many large gatherings—football games seem to be a favorite—during which some well-meaning soul holds up a sign reading "John 3:16." It's not exactly my kind of evangelism, but who am I to judge?

I usually try to plan ahead so that some other priest gets the opportunity to preach today. Somehow I got outsmarted this year. In some ways it seems that a disproportional amount of my ministry has been devoted to contextualizing and deconstructing this verse—a verse which lives overtly and proudly at the heart of evangelicalism and equally powerfully but less obviously just under the surface of much of the religious practice in America. Arguably these few words are both the origin of Christian triumphalism, our way or the highway—the highway, by the way, being the one to hell—and certainly a significant underpinning in the great sin of anti-Semitism that has plagued the church and the world for centuries. Today because I must I offer three brief bullet points:

- ❖ The community of John was angry and divided
- ❖ The conflict was an intra-family division, always the worst, between Jews who continued to identify with ancient, traditional Judaism and Jews who now aligned with the emerging religion, Christianity
- ❖ An age-old characteristic of unexamined religion showed its ugly head: "my" side is only right when "yours" is ultimately wrong.

In my mind this milieu of hurt and anger must be acknowledged in any preaching on this passage. Otherwise we are forced to conclude, no matter how we may wriggle around it and/or dress it up, that we believe that in the end only we are right. I emphatically do not believe that (nor feel guilty about not believing it) and further don't believe that many of you do; but if you do, there is plenty of room here for you to believe as your heart leads you. And that's all I want to say about that today. Mostly all.

Instead, today I want to talk about an encounter between two very compelling men who touch my heart every time I read this story: Nicodemus and Jesus. Smart, successful, and inquisitive, Nicodemus approached Jesus because life for him was not working. Though appearing not to be, he was filled with fear; and so he went by night to see Jesus. He was fearful mostly of what people thought. Those in Nicodemus's inner circle of pious educated friends would be surprised not only by his choice of potential guru, but also by his need for one. Nicodemus had done everything right and lived among a group of relatively privileged Jews who had long since discovered how to live successfully even in a time of Roman occupation. They were erudite, self-satisfied, and didn't seem to need much more than what they had. But appearances, as we know, are not always what they seem. You perhaps see why I find him so interesting.

What Nicodemus wanted from Jesus is not terribly clear. In another gospel story a man strikingly similar to Nicodemus, an unnamed young ruler, came with the question, "What must we do to inherit eternal life?" In the case of Nicodemus, though, there was not an opening question. Instead he made an observation, "Rabbi, we know that you must be from God because you do all these great things." This beginning was the first sign that Nicodemus was too afraid to come with his heart, trusting his head so much more. We understand this approach. Our spiritual journeys are often so disconnected from our hearts that we engage them as we would

any other project to be mastered. Define this, understand that, and/or practice this technique—tasks engaged as though the Kingdom of God is something within our grasp, ours for the achieving rather than receiving as the gift of God. No wonder we are tired.

My heart hurts for him and for us. Jesus knew that standing before him was a man on a search but not one who was ready to suspend his reliance upon his own understanding. W. H. Auden correctly said that to get Christianity at all, one needs to be a bit of a poet. Indeed. Jesus began to say to Nicodemus strange things: “To see the Kingdom of God, one must be born again, this time from above; one must be born of water and the spirit,” adding the enigmatic claim, “the wind blows where the wind blows.” With his powerful intellect and alpha mind, Nicodemus’s question, “How can one be born again after growing old?” makes perfect sense—particularly if you are not a poet. Nicodemus was not: he dealt with reason, facts, concrete answers, rules, and compliance. What kind of control can one exert in a world where the wind blows where the wind blows? “How on earth can these things be?” he asked. Good question.

“The wind blows where the wind blows,” which is to say the spirit moves where the spirit moves, has become for me one of the most treasured verses in all scripture. It thrills me that these words made it into the gospel of John, strong evidence of divine inspiration. Their survival in this chapter is nothing short of extraordinary, for these words blow wide open the world of spirituality and religion, utterly subverting the manner in which most of the third chapter of John shuts down theological openness. Thank God for them.

But sadly the words were not sufficient for Nicodemus; they were too extreme and frightening. I understand his reluctance as I expect most of us do. Fearful as we often are, he enjoyed the esteem of his peers, a group for whom religion was largely pragmatic, certainly not the domain of wondering mystics who purported a living, breathing spirit, one which moved where it desired, quite beyond their control. The Nicodemus effect lives among us; we cherish, sometimes almost worship, what we know and are suspicious of what operates in another realm. There is nothing wrong with knowing, even knowing a great deal. Like you, I expect, I treasure intellectualism; it only becomes a spiritual problem when we begin to believe that knowing is enough. It never is.

In today’s passage, Nicodemus simply fades away; what he did after this seminal night we can’t be sure. But when Jesus was killed, Nicodemus reappeared; something had changed. Then in the full light of day he found his voice and his nerve. After Jesus’ abused and lifeless body was taken from the cross upon which he died, Nicodemus came forward to care for the body of Jesus with spices, a mixture of myrrh and aloes. For Nicodemus the mystery had become the story; what he had known so diligently all his life was replaced with a person and for him, I believe, life began anew, this time born from above.

Most of us, myself leading the way, don’t describe ourselves as “born agains,” that designation having become somehow synonymous with being narrow and judgmental in our religious culture. We need to reclaim some of that language—for it is indeed the language of the poet. Born again, every day, a new opportunity to ride the spirit which blows where it blows. This is very good news.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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