First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

March 5, 2022

A Rushing Wind

John 3:1-17 (NRSV)

**Nicodemus Visits Jesus**

**3**Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2**He came to Jesus[a] 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 unless God is with that person.” **3**Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”[b] **4**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?” **5**Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. **6**What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7**Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You[c] must be born from above.’[d] **8**The wind[e] 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.” **9**Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” **10**Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? **11**“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you[f] do not receive our testimony. **12**If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe; how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? **13**No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.[g] **14**And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15**that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.[h]**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.**17**“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.

This is one of my favorite passages in the Bible and verses 16 and 17 are some of the best know verses found in Holy Scripture. Being a musician, whenever I read verse 16, my mind immediately goes to the John Stainer choral piece “God So Loved the World.” And maybe your mind goes there, as well.

But there’s quite a bit more going on here than words used in a famous piece of music. In addition to the words Stainer quotes from verse 16, we also have verse 5, where Jesus tells us that, *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”* This particular verse lays out Gods requirements that all believers be baptized and has also been used as the basis for the phrase “Born Again,” with comes with whatever baggage that particular interpretation might carry for each of us in our modern-day context, but wait! There’s more! Verse 8 tells us that, ***8 “****The wind[e] 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.”* And we haven’t even discussed the connection that the writer of John makes between Jesus and Moses, in verse 14. So, there’s quite a bit happening here and that can make preaching this passage interesting, to say the least.

The challenge I face, when confronted with a passage as rich in content as this one, is knowing where to place my focus. My temptation is to try and cover all of the bases, here, and attempt to address every single theme that shows up. I could throw everything *and* the kitchen sink at you, but more than likely, this would create nothing more than a word salad and word salads do not a good sermon make. My goal, in situations like this, is to focus on one or two areas and build a meaningful message around a section of the passage.

So, let’s back up a bit, and start by talking about Nicodemus. We don’t know very much about Nicodemus and he appears just three times in scripture and only in the gospel of John. What we do know is that he was a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the governing body of Judaism during the Roman occupation. We know that he is the only Pharisee in the Bible, mentioned by name, and verse 2 makes it very clear that this powerful religious leader also believed Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

That said, when Nicodemus visits Jesus, it’s under cover of darkness. This is significant, because it tells me that while good ol’ Nicodemus might have been a believer, he wasn’t quite ready to go public, when he pays his visit. The wind of the Spirit had blown through Nicodemus’ life, but there was still some resistance to where the Spirit was leading him. If Nicodemus had gone public with his belief, he stood to lose everything. His position, the power that came with that position, his livelihood, and probably his family, as well. Frankly, this visit is sounding like Nicodemus wanted to have his cake and eat it too.

Now, Nicodemus does eventually redeem himself by defending Jesus before the Sanhedrin, and assisting Joseph of Arimathea in placing Jesus’ body in the tomb, following the crucifixion, but that comes later and right now, he’s on the fence.

I think one of the reasons this passage resonates with me, is that I can relate to the internal struggle that Nicodemus is going through. Being willing to give up beliefs that you’ve held for all of your life; being willing to change; being willing to pay the price of discipleship, is really, really hard. It’s so much easier to tell ourselves, “Oh, that’s just my imagination,” or, “Naw, that not the Holy Spirit, God can’t possibly want me to give up those beliefs.”

But the thing about the rushing wind of the Holy Spirit, is that there’s no stopping it. It’s going to blow wherever and whenever it will. We can resist all we want, but in the end, we have absolutely no control over what happens when that wind begins to blow.

In the late 70’s, when I was a senior in high school, I started hearing about Sonja Johnson. Sonja Johnson was a 5th generation Mormon, who challenged the LDS church’s position on the Equal Rights Amendment. It was a huge deal, and quite the scandal in my tight knit community, as the official position of the church was to oppose the ERA. The church took a very active and vocal role in the national debate over this amendment and for a woman to challenge the authority of the church leadership on this issue was shocking and intolerable, to say the least. The entire incident came to its inevitable and unfortunate conclusion, when the church excommunicated Ms. Johnson. For a majority of folks, that was the end of the matter, but not so much for me. I remember thinking how unfair it was that someone should be kicked out for voicing what they believed and standing up to an unjust system. When I mentioned how unfair I thought the whole situation was, I became publicly branded as a troublemaker, which, honestly, was the beginning of a long career of trouble making. Privately, though, those same people who loudly and publicly denounced Sonja Johnson as a heretic, would come to me and tell me that they agreed with everything I said, but they just couldn’t go public, because they had too much to lose by challenging the General Authorities. That disconnect; that hypocrisy between public and private words, just didn’t sit well with me and it became the first crack in the wall of my belief in the teachings of the LDS church.

In spite of my feelings, as someone who grew up in a faith tradition dominated and controlled by men it was truly difficult for me to let go of a lifetime of belief about what the role of women should be in the church. The first time I heard a woman preach, I literally became queasy. Women aren’t supposed to preach! The church says so. The Bible says so! The first time I witnessed a woman presiding at Communion, I just couldn’t deal with it and, I’m sorry to say, I refused to take Communion that Sunday simply because it was a woman who had consecrated the elements. It was much easier for me to fall back on what I had been taught from childhood on, rather than open myself up to trusting in the work of the Spirit.

As I continued my spiritual journey; as I became more familiar with different interpretations of biblical passages which historically have been used to justify denying women their rightful place in church leadership; as I became friends with female pastors and female church elders; that crack in the wall of my childhood beliefs began to widen. The rushing wind of the Spirit, soon grew to hurricane strength and, ultimately, blew the whole wall of my wrong beliefs down.

Today, I am profoundly grateful for the countless women who mentored me, taught me, put up with my narrow views and gently (sometimes not so gently) helped to mold me into the man, and the pastor, I am today. I thank God each and every day for the presence of these women in my life and in my ministry.

Where is the rushing wind of the Spirit blowing in your life today? What old ways of thinking might God be calling us to reconsider or change? Are we ready to risk everything we hold dear in order to follow where the Spirit leads? Are we willing to be born again, in the Spirit?

Here’s the thing, folks, the wind of the Spirit is going to blow whenever and wherever it will. It may be a gentle breeze, or it may crash into our lives with the force of a hurricane. When it blows your way, be ready because there’s no stopping it, no matter how hard we try. AMEN