

Isaiah 6:1-8

6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.

6:2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.

6:3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

6:4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

6:5 And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

6:6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.

6:7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

6:8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

John 3:1-17

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

3:2 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."

3:3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

3:4 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?"

3:5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

3:6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

3:7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'

3:8 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."

3:9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

3:10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

3:11 "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.

3:12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you

about heavenly things?

3:13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

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.

3:17 "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.

Proclamation of the Word

Nicodemus had heard what Jesus was doing in Jerusalem. There had been an uproar when Jesus waltzed into the Temple and cleared it of the merchants- a veritable market profiting from Temple life. Jesus' reputation had preceded him. He turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana and performed many miraculous signs. Many believed in Jesus' name.

Nicodemus, not wanting to risk exposure, came under the cover of darkness. He was a man of religious stature with his doctorate in ministry and articles in theological journals. So as a VIP with a theological reputation to uphold, he went after dark when everyone was sleeping.

As they spoke, Jesus was clear about one thing. "You must be born from above to see the kingdom of God," he told Nicodemus. And that is where Nicodemus got stuck, literally. He got hung up on the mechanics of being born a second time rather than seeing what Jesus meant. As an older man pushing retirement, he could not imagine re-entering his mother's womb. As they met there the wind started to blow a bit in the evening.

Jesus seized on that. He said, do you hear that wind, Nick? Do you feel the cool night breeze? Being born of the spirit is like that- unseen, but something happens. There is movement and energy. Like those large windmills out West used to harness the energy, we are to be moved, changed. Something happens to us caused by the Spirit. Something changes for God's sake. You are like a windmill.

"How can this be?" Nicodemus declared. And that is when Jesus shot back.

You may have all those honorary doctorates and a column in the big newspaper, but you are missing the point, my friend. "God is so crazy in love with the world, that he sent me to show you who God is most clearly. God doesn't want you sneaking around after dark, God wants you to openly and in the light of day to be made new and to come clean. You may have all that knowledge, but I came to show you how much God loves you and wants you to be in relationship with Him and his world. God desires for you to come alive, not just go through the motions."

Nicodemus did notice his pulse quicken, a flutter in his chest like the time he fell in love or the day his first child was born. The world seemed different somehow, looked richer with much possibility. But he walked away, scared that someone might still notice him.

But that is not the end of the story fortunately for Nicodemus.

When it came time to bury Jesus, he went with Joseph of Arimathea to prepare the body.

In love and respect, they prepared Jesus' body for the tomb.

They went this time in broad daylight- a courageous thing to do with the witch hunt for anyone associated with Jesus going on.

Scripture does not record what happened when Nicodemus found out that Jesus was alive, that death was defeated, but I bet he wept like a newborn baby, saying "It is all true!" (John 3:1-21; 19:38-42 with credit to Frederick Beuchner for the retelling)ⁱ

If I were a betting gal, I bet Nicodemus taught and served as a changed man from that moment on.

The love of God overflows into the world changing hearts, changing lives.

Today is Trinity Sunday, and I would be a fool to try to explain the doctrine of the Trinity in a 15 minute sermon. Volumes have been written on the Trinity. Councils debated it for years. Some died proclaiming it, but even one of the great theologians of the early church, Augustine, claimed he could not explain it.

Mystery, holy mystery. That's who God is. God in three persons, a family who always makes room for more. A holy dance full of energy, movement. Love so amazing, so divine, it has to be shared. I believe that from the very beginning, the Creator, formed and shaped the world and all that live in it. Like a artist who cannot help but paint, the poet who cannot stop writing verse, a dancer who cannot help but move, or the scientist who cannot stop herself from exploring the mysteries of the universe, God could not help but let that energy, power spill out in flowing love and creativity so God made room for us. We are God's plus one. Through covenant promises and faithful love to God's people, the law was given and prophets spoke, calling people to faithful, loving relationships. And when they had trouble seeing, God sent the Jesus, his Son, to show in deed and tell in words, how broad, how deep, how high is the love of God. And the Holy Spirit bears witness to that love in all ways. God is a relationship, and we are invited into that relationship, dance partners, if you will, with a creative, loving, redeeming God.

That is what Jesus was trying to communicate to Nicodemus. And at first he could not see it. But once Nicodemus experienced it, it felt something like falling in love. It took some time, but it is the Spirit's work, and not ours to control. Our call is to receive it, tell it, share it, show it- the love of God poured out in Jesus. We see the kingdom of God.

Perhaps you have heard the joke:

What happens when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with a Presbyterian? You have a person who knocks on doors and says nothing.

Evangelism is a scary word for some of us. But I don't feel called to knock on the door of strangers and hand them a tract about how to get saved. God's nature is one of relationship. I think we are called in our relationships to bear witness to what God is doing in the world. Sure, we can demonstrate the gospel as well, but we have to speak it, too, or some might miss it like Nicodemus did at first.

Some years ago a couple of pastors from Oklahoma wrote a book, *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt*. One of the chapters is titled, "Are you saved or are you Presbyterian?" For many of us, there is not a specific moment in time, but many moments when we have sensed the presence of God, like the touch of a breeze, and felt our pulse quicken. Perhaps the life of faith, has more starts and stops than we like to admit, times when we are committed, focused on following Jesus, and other times we are distracted by things of this world like getting in with the right social crowd, or succeeding in my profession, or just wandering, lost for a while.

One pastor writes,

I remember an old Presbyterian missionary who taught us theology in Bible College. One day he said that he could not remember a time when Christ was not real and precious in his life. A fellow student, troubled that Brother Davidson could not remember the day and the hour he was converted, challenged him: "How do you know you are a Christian?" Brother D. pounded on his chest and replied: "Because Jesus lives in my heart." The evidence of Christ's presence was real in Brother Davidson's life.ⁱⁱ

We are God's plus one, invited into relationship with God so we can see the Kingdom of God among us in real ways. And your life will change. Make no mistake. We are called to share that love in ways that might make some turn up their noses- seeking the lost, the left out, the one who is not usually invited to the table, speaking on behalf of those who cannot speak because he is a child, a poor minority, a gay teen, a migrant worker. In the gospel of John, soon after Jesus encounters Nicodemus in the dark, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman in broad daylight at the town well. Breaking all sorts of laws, meeting with a woman, and a filthy Samaritan, he offers that same relationship with himself to her. She went goes rejoicing and tells everyone she could! She may have been one of the first true evangelists besides John, the baptizer. Nicodemus, being a religious man, took a little longer to see it, but the Spirit must have been working on him, too.

Evangelism is about relationships. Jesus met with people and talked to them. Evangelism is sharing the good news of God's love. Or as it has been written, "Evangelism is one beggar, telling another beggar where to find bread." (attributed to J.T. Niles)

On Easter Sunday, we read the passage about the stranger on the road to Emmaus. When Cleopas and his friend are walking along they meet a stranger and tell him what has happened, of Jesus' life, death, and the empty tomb. When they invite the stranger to stay for dinner, it is in the breaking of bread that they recognize the stranger as Jesus himself. Emmaus meals- two persons who know one another- reaching out to someone less known for the purpose of breaking bread and getting to know one another. That is how Jesus evangelized. And where two or three are gathered, the presence of God is there also. Hey, it is even Trinitarian- 3 persons and God in the midst. Who will you invite to be your plus one? to invite go out to breakfast or lunch after worship on Sunday?

On Easter I challenged you to have an Emmaus meal once a month. Have you done so? What happened? Try it. I imagine many of us see people every Sunday that we do not know. You and a friend, invite someone you do not know as well to eat together. Keep it simple. Jesus, Cleopas, and friend ate fish and bread around a fire. Maybe if we practice our faith with each other, we can learn to go out and practice it with those outside the faith. I know the preacher is assigning homework again! But the Christian life is one that must be practiced to develop skills, like a golf swing or playing a musical instrument. Something holy like communion happens when we eat together.

God's love is a deep well of living water that never runs out. When we drink of it, our lives are never the same. Maybe if all our friends are already Christian, or just like us, we need to make some new friends. That is what Jesus did all the time. Maybe they will see evidence of the presence of Christ living in you and have their lives changed for the better. Or you may be surprised how God might change you for the better though knowing them.

Who is God calling to be a plus one for you? Are you ready like Isaiah to say, "Here I am, Lord. Send me."

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ⁱ Frederick Beuchner first published in his book Peculiar Treasures drawing us into the experience of Nicodemus. I have adapted using my own words.

ⁱⁱ unnamed commentator on Preaching Trinity B, Ministry Matters at ministrymatters.com