

**"BLOWN OPEN"**  
**Genesis 12:1-4a, John 3:1-17**  
**February 20, 2005**  
**The Rev. Ryan Lambert**  
Copyright © 2005

After wrestling with the bull for perhaps thirty seconds, trying to get the hand placement just right, trying to get comfortable on an animal that could conceivably kill him, the rider gives a quick nod of the head and suddenly, as if out of nowhere, the gate comes flying open and the bull rider is thrust into indescribable positions as he attempts to ride the bull for a few seconds, hoping to stay on long enough to score enough points to qualify for the bull riding title. Something happens in the moment after the rider nods, announcing that he is ready. From the television or even from the arena one cannot see it, but someone pushes a button and the gate opens. There is something mystical and magical about that moment. Intellectually we know there is a complicated electronic process that allows that gate to open; but as we watch, it simply looks like the gate has suddenly flown open to release the rider. It is as if the wind has suddenly blown open the gate and the turbulent and unpredictable ride has begun.

Now I really don't know anything about rodeo. The sum total of my rodeo experience comes from one long-ago hot afternoon sitting in stadium stands under the beating sun in Ellensburg, Washington. But as I heard the story of Nicodemus and his relentless questions of Jesus, the image that continually emerged was of that explosive moment as that gate opens, thrusting bull and rider into the unknown. When that gate opens, I suspect it is like a whole new world opens up for the rider and suddenly it is all about hanging on for dear life. And that is what Jesus is explaining to Nicodemus. . .that there is a whole new life available to him and to all of us, if only we choose to grab it and hold on for dear life.

This passage is loaded with questions, and not just from Nicodemus. One of the struggles that scholars and readers have with this passage concerns that "born from above" translation. The word is "anōthen" in Greek and can be translated either "born from above" or "born again." And this is where I join Nicodemus as a skeptic. He asked, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Well, Jesus, answer that one. And answer how this passage has come to be so definitive of contemporary Christian experience.

Often when I hear the language of being "born again," it is in conjunction with something a person has done, in a moment when they prayed specific words, or saw their relationship to God in a new light. There is always an active person involved in this discussion, always us changing our relationship to God, always us bringing about a re-birth. But the "born again" metaphor doesn't make sense to me because of this active component. Why? Because birth isn't something we play an active role in. It simply happens to us. We are passive recipients of our initial birth, brought into this world

through a complex and sometimes thoroughly monitored process. But no amount of monitoring changes the fact that as the one being born, we are just along for the ride. For all of our science and technology, birth is still not fully understood and cannot be completely controlled. In many ways it just happens. And that is how it is with our "birth from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and as it blows over us we are offered new life in Christ.

Now scholars and contemporary Christians debate the "born anew" vs. "born from above" question; but when Nicodemus heard this passage he was struggling with his culture, his Jewish heritage, and his understanding of power and prestige. And Jesus was messing around with all of that. Nicodemus gets a bad rap, I think, because it is widely assumed that he never quite gets it; because as this passage ends, he is still throwing out questions and is in a state of disbelief. But what Jesus was proposing was very radical and, I would imagine, quite startling. In the time of Nicodemus everything began with family. If you had power and prestige, it was because of who your family was. Power and prestige were yours because that is what you were born into. If you were born the child of a shepherd, then you, too, would be a shepherd. Born to a farmer, then you, too, would till the land. If you were born into slavery, in slavery you would stay. And so, when Jesus begins talking about being "born from above" or "born anew," it really doesn't matter how Nicodemus understood it; because either way, Jesus was talking about altering the structures of family and culture. Suddenly, Jesus was proposing that birthright didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that relationship with God and, through that relationship, your station in life was changed.

Our reading from Genesis tells of the call of Abram. "Go to the land that I will show you, and I will make you a great nation." This is a promise to Abram, and it is a promise to the nation of Israel. These words send Abram and the Jews upon a long and tumultuous journey, and I imagine that as Nicodemus, the Pharisee who questioned Jesus, this history played a large part in his questioning. How could it not? Jesus was proposing something completely new, and it was something that in many ways disregarded the entire history of Nicodemus. Suddenly it no longer mattered who he was; and so, Nicodemus was stunned and confused. The potential of everyone, including Nicodemus, was blown open to new possibilities.

And that is how it is still. This passage from John ends with what I like to call the "football passage." Some of you know why. Sometime during the 1970's, people starting holding up signs at football games and other sporting events that simply said, "John 3:16." And so although I had memorized this scripture in Sunday school, I began to think about it as the football passage, because that is where I most often saw it.

But this oft-quoted passage really is the most important part of the exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." Remember, this is long before Jesus would die upon the cross. For a long time I thought about this passage

in conjunction with the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. But this passage comes much earlier than that, and is, in fact, spoken by Jesus. And so, even as this passage foreshadows the cross, it also speaks to the life and ministry of Jesus. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son" . . .to walk upon this earth and proclaim new life for everyone, regardless of where you come from or who you are. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son to build up a church and show God's justice and mercy, not just through his miracles but also through the relationships he built, the people he loved and cared for, and the way he included those who otherwise would have been on the outside. For God so loved the world that he offered a new life to everyone who believed, a new life that is shaped by the spirit that blows us into unexpected situations and places.

While John 3:16 became the "football verse," let us not forget that Jesus's words don't end there. The next verse is, "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." And this is where Jesus lets Nicodemus in on the hopeful reason for his teachings and his presence.

In Christ, new life is offered to everyone. In the United Church of Christ's ad campaign we are using the phrase "an extravagant welcome" to describe what we believe is offered by Jesus and should be offered by the church. And that is what Jesus is trying to communicate to Nicodemus. God is offering an extravagant welcome to him. Nicodemus is to be born anew and be fully known and fully loved by God. Lineage and history no longer matter because the spirit is blowing. This new life isn't offered because he had earned it, or because he was a mighty Pharisee but because God was welcoming him and everyone alike. "Come down a notch or two, Nicodemus. . .and be raised up by the Spirit." What a choice for Nicodemus; what a challenge to let go of the ordered society and instead be blown this way or that by the whims of "the spirit."

I suspect we don't hear what happens to Nicodemus because he has to go off and figure things out. And as we hear the story of Nicodemus, we do too. Our question is the same one that was posed to Nicodemus: "Where are the winds of the spirit blowing me?" This passage is so compelling to me because it is so very hopeful. In our hearing of the Nicodemus story, we are offered an opportunity to hear the divine call to us in transformative and creative ways.

And so I ask you, "Where and how is God calling to you?" What dreams or projects remain only in the planning stages? What are you doing while you suppress your real desires and your real hopes? The story of Nicodemus is a story of redemption and promise. God knows far more than we do and God's wants for us are not yet fully known.

As we gather this morning, whether in this building or on the slopes at Winter Weekend, the winds of the spirit are blowing in and through us, shaping us and guiding us. Nicodemus had his preconceived notions, and we have ours, too. Are we ignoring the movements of the spirit because we know better? Are we ignoring them because our

rational minds can't fully wrap our heads around the language of spirit and wind? Are we just plain missing God's voice because our Ipods are up too loud, our schedules too crammed full, or our prejudices too strong?

Whatever the reason, I suspect that we are all missing something. Finding Nicodemus and Jesus here in conversation reminds me that there is no reason to wait until Easter to think about new life and resurrection. Even amid the dark and penitential days of Lent there is resurrection. The spirit is moving, and everything is blown open! Thanks be to God! Amen.