

John 3:1-17
16 March 2014

SGL
CCNS

Breath of the Spirit

Jamie- God how long is a million years to you?
God- it is but a second Jamie.
Jamie- God how much is a million dollars to you?
God- it is but a penny to me
Jamie- God can I have a penny?
God- just a second

Does God wake you up at night? It happens but likely we don't realize that it is God trying to get our attention. This night, God got Nicodemus out of bed. It may have been a night lit by the moon like last night was. No lantern was needed. Nicodemus found his way by the glow off the stone walls and paths to where Jesus was staying. It seems Jesus was up, too, perhaps for similar reasons.

This man of deep faith, steeped in Jewish tradition, was drawn to another man of deep faith who was shedding new light on old traditions. Did he have to sneak around in the dark to go talk to Jesus? Maybe. The bottom line that is that Nicodemus, like all of us, was looking for answers.

"I see the things you do, Jesus. Only someone who comes from God can do what you do." Jesus tells old Nick why he sees what he does. "If you are born from above, born anew, you have eyes to see the kingdom of God."

Well that doesn't clear it up at all for the poor guy. He's more confused now! "What do you mean?"

What I am telling you so earnestly is this: Unless one is born of water and the Spirit,[a] he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. ⁶ [humans] can only reproduce human life, but the Holy Spirit gives new life from heaven; ⁷ so don't be surprised at my statement that you must be born again! ⁸ Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it will go next, so it is with the Spirit." (The Living Bible) We do not know who next will receive this life from heaven.

Maybe it's the late hour. Maybe it's the stiff boundaries of traditions. Nicodemus went to Jesus looking for answers when his gut was telling him something more visceral, more profound than reason was at stake. No matter how hard Nicodemus tries to apply logic to the workings of faith he comes up short. One cannot put limits on the power – the Spirit – of God.

In his book, *Following Jesus without Embarrassing God*, Tony Campolo tells a story about Randy Johnson, who was President Lyndon Johnson's nephew. Randy was a mediocre quarterback on a mediocre Oklahoma State football team. Nobody would have noticed him except for the fact that he was LBJ's nephew.

It was 1966 and Oklahoma State was close to finishing another bad year, except for their final game against arch-rival Oklahoma, a top ten team on their way to a bowl game. State should have been beaten easily, but you know how it is with big rivalries; it was a close game right down to the very last. But with 8 seconds left Oklahoma State was behind by 6 points, it was raining hard, and they were 80 yards away from the goal line.

The coach called time-out and sent in all the seniors so they could finish the game on the field.

He said to third-string quarterback Randy Johnson, "Call any play you want. It's over." When they came out of the huddle, the coach couldn't believe his eyes. They were lining up for play 13. Play 13 was a trick play they never used in a game for one simple reason – it had never worked in practice. But, they ran play 13. And it worked. They went 80 yards on that one play and kicked the extra point and won the game. While fans stormed the field and players jumped up and down, the coach just stood there in shocked disbelief.

In the locker room, the coach asked Randy, "Why? Why did you call play 13? And Randy said, "Well Coach, we got in the huddle and I looked at old bill and there he was injured for two years and never getting to play much and now it was all over. He had tears running down his face and I looked and saw his number was 8. Then I looked around and there was George and he had come to practice and worked hard for four straight years and only got to play one or two times and now it was over and there were tears running down his face and I looked and his number was 7. So I added 8 and 7 and got 13; so I called play 13."

The coach just stared at Randy a minute and said, "But Randy. $8+7$ isn't 13 – it's 15." Randy thought a minute and said, "Well coach, if I was as smart as you, we would have lost the game!"

Campolo concluded, "Sometimes the 'correct' answer is not the 'right' answer."

Jesus' oblique geometry didn't shape up for Nicodemus. He just laughed at how ridiculous it all sounded. Faith can be ridiculous, though, can't it? Sarah laughed when she was told she would have a child when it should have been humanly impossible. It was divinely possible.

In the face of the loss of a husband and certain prejudice, Naomi stayed with Ruth in a foreign land, accepting a God against all odds. Ridiculous – and possible to not only stay alive but thrive.

On a cold, dark morning, a woman finds an open, empty tomb. A searing double loss shakes her only to turn and find the one she is looking for right in front of her – one no longer in need of a tomb. Questionable? Ridiculous? Most certainly divinely possible.

In the darkest of times, in the deepest of nights, we wake and hear the wind blowing where it will. Is it the mighty gust that shook the windows that opens our eyes? Or could it be the Spirit swirling around us, breathing in us and through us? What ridiculous thing is God doing in our lives?

Jesus' midnight chat with Nicodemus concludes with the most oft-quoted bit of scripture. "For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so that anyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." What this means is that Jesus is offering Nicodemus the same he offers everyone: freedom of life through the Spirit. How that adds up for Nicodemus may sum up differently for each one of us.

The point is, we are free to imagine, free to do things differently, free to allow a breath of fresh air into all we do as people of God, and as the church. We can do the math all we want – but usually God has a different equation in mind when it comes to our lives, and to who we are as God's people in this place.

God is always trying to shine a light on our path, even in the middle of the night. The closing words of Jesus to Nicodemus give us the sum of it all: "God sent his son into the world...to redeem the world." This is a light we can carry with us, no matter how dark or how ridiculous it may sound at times. "...God loves this whole world -- including us and our little corners of it – extravagantly . . ." (Lose) It's up to us to claim that love, to breathe, to live, and to laugh.

David Lose, Dear Working Preacher for 3-16-14, www.workingpreacher.org

Quote from Tony Campolo in a sermon for 16 March 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Delmer L. Chilton, www.lectionarylab.com