

**March 8, 2020 | Journey & Sanctuary worship services**

**TEXT: [John 3:1–15](#)**

**TITLE: Under the Cloak of Darkness**

*By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy*

Bible passages don't just appear out of nowhere. Every passage has historical and contextual purposes for which it was written, as well as, theological, spiritual, implicit and contemporary implications and purposes. And this passage is no exception. Jesus was not hidden nor had he separated himself from others in the Gospel of John. As a matter of fact, John the Baptist openly testified that he was not the Messiah or Elijah, but the one who is coming, was before him and is the Lamb of God. When Jesus appears the next day in the wilderness where John is baptizing, two of John's disciples, along with others decide to become followers of Jesus. Jesus and those who are following him openly attend a wedding in Cana where Jesus changes water into wine. They proceed to Jerusalem, where Jesus further upsets the order of the day by cleansing the Temple and driving away unscrupulous merchants and moneychangers. Jesus has not been in hiding or on the downlow—he's been out there doing signs and wonders, glorifying God. So, it is safe to assume that Jesus' reputations, his actions and the signs of his authority, majesty and power were being discussed broad and wide. People were talking about and amazed with this man who was doing counter-cultural and unimaginable things.

Today's passage is replete with twists and turns, multiple word meanings, and misunderstandings. The Gospel of John, has a discernable pattern in which Jesus performs a sign, dialogue ensues between Jesus and those present and witnessing the sign, and then Jesus engages in an extended discourse interpreting the sign to bring about understanding.

One such discourse was with Nicodemus, who came to Jesus under the cloak of darkness. The writer of John states upfront that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, set apart, his life dedicated to keeping all of Torah, as well as all the voluminous regulations and rules the scribes established as their interpretation of Torah, assigning by-laws and legalisms to cover every area of life. Nicodemus was also a leader of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin and had he religious jurisdiction.

Therefore, it is surprising that Nicodemus would want to dialogue or speak with Jesus at all, as Jesus didn't seem to follow any of the conventions of the day associated with being righteous. Yet, under the cloak of darkness, perhaps so he wouldn't been seen by other Sanhedrin or because it was the habit of some to study at night when interruptions would be few, Nicodemus seeks out and approaches Jesus. Calling out, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from God, because apart from God you couldn't perform the signs that you do." Nicodemus did not ask Jesus a question nor did he as Jesus to perform a sign, it was obvious that he had already witnessed Jesus doing so.

Rather than acknowledging what was obvious, Jesus lays some knowledge on Nicodemus, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being

born from above.” In other words, the signs and wonders of which you inquire are not that important, what’s important is the change in a person’s life, best described as a new birth. Or in the words of Paul, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinth. 5:17).

Nicodemus obviously misunderstood what Jesus said, asking “how is possible for a person enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born again.” Nicodemus missed Jesus’ point. He was listening and discerning Jesus’ words literally, with a human ear, when in fact Jesus was speaking of spiritual and heavenly things. To be born again or anew is to undergo a radical, ontological change to the soul, that can only be described as be being born all over again.

Nicodemus had bumped up against the struggle that each of us encounters many times over in life. We have a desire to change, to do the things that are of God; to be kind, generous, loving, gracious and humble, but...we are not able to change anything about ourselves by ourselves. True change, rebirth is not realized through human achievement or effort, it only comes from the grace and power of God.

Jesus using the wind as an example of why it’s difficult for humanity to grasp the full and complete meaning of being born again or anew states, “The pneuma, blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” Pneuma, has multiple definitions in Greek, meaning both wind and spirit. So, Jesus was saying to Nicodemus, you can hear and feel and see the results of the blowing wind, but you do not know where it originates from or where it goes.

There are many things about the wind we may not know or understand, but we can plainly see the effects. The people in Tennessee saw the effects of a wind that blew so hard and violently in the middle of the night that lives were lost, homes and communities were destroyed this past week. Currently, we are experiencing the potential of the sickly and deadly effects of someone innocently coughing or sneezing in the atmosphere resulting in respiratory illnesses of every permutation. We can’t see the wind, the cough, the sneeze being exhaled, but we certainly experience the effects, the changes they precipitate or initiate.

Jesus goes on to say, “So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” We can see the effects of the Spirit of God blowing in and on the life of one another, despite the fact that we cannot physically see the wind, the Spirit blowing. Now if I were in the black church, about now I would say, even though we can’t see it with the naked eye, we know the Spirit of God is moving when we witness God making ways out of no way. We know the Spirit of God is moving when we witness God healing, changing attitudes and dispositions, opening doors and windows and cracks pouring out blessings that we don’t have room enough to receive. We know the Spirit of God is moving when we witness reconciliations and restoration of relationships. And we know the Spirit of God is moving with the dawning of each new day that brings the possibility of new opportunities, new mercies and renewed grace!

Now with all that, you would think that Nicodemus and each of us would understand what it means to be born anew, again from above. But Nicodemus, the man who came under the cloak of darkness has not come into the light. For his response and final word to Jesus in this passage is “how can these things be?” How can these things be?

Before we castigate Nicodemus, we must examine the question of “how can these things be” in our own lives. How can these things be when we sit, distill, and discuss implicit bias, prejudice, and racism in our midst and yet remain silent, unaware or ignorant to some of us being the source and purveyors of it? How can these things be when we say we love our siblings in Christ, yet our actions speak something altogether different, turning our proverbial noses up at people living in homelessness, economic insufficiency, or people who don’t have access to healthcare or educational opportunities? How can these things be, when we look with disdain upon others or don’t try to love people back into relationship? How can these things be when in one of the richest countries in the world, women and children, people of color, and some immigrants are still living in poverty? How can these things be when there is a greater percentage of black and brown men incarcerated in this country, many because they don’t have the economic means to bond out or to hire competent legal counsel? How can these things be?

These “things be” because we are still approaching Jesus under the cloak of darkness. We have a desire to be the people God created us to be, but we’re still questioning, still seeking, still searching, still trying to do, be, become in our own strength...not allowing the Spirit of God to refresh, revive, renew and rebirth. But thank God for Jesus. Our answer is right here in the text. “God so loved the world, all of us, everyone, that God sent the only Son, that we would not perish, these things would not be, but that we might have every lasting life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17). That’s how these things shall be, that’s how the cloak of darkness is cast off, only through the power, love and authority of Jesus. By seeking Jesus, the Christ, the light who has come into the world and whom darkness cannot overcome the cloak of darkness is removed and thrown off.

The writer of the Gospel of John sums it up: “The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” And Sojourner Truth stated it like this, “Life is a hard battle anyway. I will not allow my life’s light to be determined by the darkness around me.”

Nicodemus was a seeker. He desired to know and live in the light and truth. His question of “how can these things be” is not the final word from him. Nicodemus shows up two additional times in the Gospel of John. In his final appearance, Nicodemus shows up at the crucifixion of Jesus to anoint Jesus’ body and prepare it for burial. Nicodemus threw off his cloak of darkness and walked in the marvelous light. May the cloak of

darkness not define, hinder, or blind us from seeking God's light, but serve as our cover to approach Jesus with curiosity, for clarification and enlightenment that we might be children of light. May is be so.

Amen