SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Night Visitor* John 3:1-21

In the world of the Gospel of John, light and dark have special meaning. The Gospel of John’s Jesus is the one whose mission is to bring people out of the shadows and into the light of God. Therefore, Nicodemus as a night visitor—this automatically tells us something about him, and something about what Jesus wants to work in him.

Actually, Nicodemus is an intriguing character because, as we get to know him, we see that he is leading two lives. On one hand, he is a Pharisee and an important member of the religious establishment and the community. This means, by vocation and by disposition, he has his doctrinal eye on all who propose different religious ideas or theologies; any ideas or practices other than what is traditional, or those proscribed by officials like himself.

It is no wonder that Jesus had come under his watch-full eye. Jesus was beginning to gather quite a crowd of followers. Moreover, he was healing—even on the Sabbath—and doing and saying all sorts of things about faithfulness and righteousness. So, any Pharisee with Israel’s best interests in mind would be cautious toward Jesus at best and would publicly oppose him at worst.

What is really intriguing about Nicodemus is that he is also privately curious about the rabbi, recognizing that somehow his teachings and works come from God. This is unsettling, but it also must have been exciting for him. So exciting that he is forced, by his own curiosity and his spiritual desire, to also draw close to Jesus, to seek him out, albeit under the cover of night.

Unfortunately, it would have been dangerous for him to openly acknowledge these feelings. He would have lost credibility among his colleagues, and he would have lost his standing in his community.

So, like most people living two lives, Nicodemus pursues his more questionable ventures at night—out of sight of the public audience. In his case, what could be described as suspicious behavior was actually a deep spiritual hunger. It was a heart and a spirit inspired by what he had seen in Jesus. It had stirred something deep within him, and even though he was hesitant, he wanted to know more.

Over time, we know that Nicodemus was changed by his relationship with Christ. In chapter seven of this gospel, Nicodemus is still leading his two lives. He does not publicly challenge the notion that a Pharisee could ever believe in Jesus [7:49], but he does defend Jesus’ right to be heard [7:50-51]—even risking being identified as one of Jesus’ followers.

By the end of Jesus’ life, Nicodemus finally ends his duplicity. No longer coming to Jesus at night, he anoints and buries the crucified Christ in the full light of day [19:39-42]. He has left the web of caution and uncertainty and has stepped into a new life as one who believes.

What did Jesus do that caused a skeptic on the sidelines to become a devoted mourner of his death? What could Jesus have said that would so radically change a person?

Jesus said “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

He must “anothen.” That is the Greek word used in the gospel. It appears three times in this chapter to refer to spiritual life change.

So, what does this mean?

*Anothen* is often used to mean “born again.” However, it does not exactly mean that.

In our popular culture, those who claim they are “born-again” Christians are, if not misusing it, at least incompletely using it. Consult any respectable Greek lexicon and you will find is that there are three basic meanings for the word anothen.

The first definition is: from above. The second is: from the beginning, from the first. The third definition is not simply again, rather it is, anew, to be *born anew*.

Many scholars think these meanings are wordplays that Jesus was employing much as he did in the parables. Unfortunately, this deepens Nicodemus’ confusion of Jesus’ statements. And so, rather than understand the metaphoric use of language, in response, Nicodemus’ confusion deepens and he instead wonders how you can be born *again*, or a second time.

For his part, Jesus understands Nicodemus’ misunderstanding of anothen as part of his disbelief, so he answers him by emphasizing the keys to the kingdom—life transformation. Jesus is talking about an invisible birth from above that creates a *visibly changed life*.

Nicodemus should have known what Jesus was talking about. But then this chapter in Jesus’ story is one in which the purity of Jesus’ love for God—his literal love of God—was confronting Nicodemus’ literal understanding and reception of his words.

In other words, it was appropriate that their meeting was at night because really they were like two ships that pass in the night.

If the concept had not been so new to him, Nicodemus might have been able to connect what Jesus was saying to any number of Old Testament references to water and spirit together, such as Ezekiel 36:25-28. A teacher of the Law would have been familiar with such references.

According to biblical scholar D.A. Carson, these references, “signify cleansing from impurity” and “the transformation of the heart that will enable people to follow God wholly.”

In other words: regeneration. A new beginning. A new life ... from God and for God.

Jesus was telling Nicodemus that his double life was not going to satisfy himself…or God. He needed one life. Theologically, perhaps it would be better to say what he needed was a new life. As I mentioned: Nicodemus is already leading two lives. He does not need the second life; he doesn’t need to get a life, or another life. He needs a *new* life.

He needs to be born anew by being born from above. Born anothen.

For Jesus, being born anothen would be as evident as the wind. You cannot control it or see it, but you know it’s at work. It is as obvious as bent branches and blowing leaves. As the late Billy Graham beautifully put it, “I do not see the wind, but I see the effects of the wind.”

Anyone who doubts the power of something unseeable but real should go over to Church of the Crossroads on University Avenue. I was there on Friday for the funeral of a man I knew. His name was Paul Tadashi Horiuchi, and there are a couple of reasons I would like to mention him in this morning’s message.

The first is because Paul—who was not a member of Church of the Crossroads—he was a custodian there. Paul was also a Mennonite, a lay minister, and a man of deep faith—deep, deep faith.

 The fruits of his faith was a life of joyful servanthood, and a heart filled with the joy of Christ. Everyone who knew him, or even met him for the first time—we all came away knowing we had encountered the true heart of servant-faith, and having experienced the joy he knew in Christ.

The second reason I am telling you about Paul is because a week or two after he died, the winds continued to rake through the island so much so that it broke apart and pulled down the Chinese Banyan tree on the *makai* side of the church.

Anyone who has ever seen that tree knows how huge the canopy was. It covered most of the parking lot that runs along that side of the property, and it was planted about eighty-eight years ago by one of the founding members of the church.

As Paul’s brothers—Isaac and David—were talking about and looking at the huge wreckage of the tree and the stump it had left behind, David wondered what it all meant.

Isaac ventured the thought that, perhaps, the tree and the land, like their brother Paul, was pointing the way toward a new life—Paul’s new life in the bosom of Christ, and the church’s renewal in some new way.

That is what anothen means. A life born from above is a life changed. It is as invisible as the wind and as obvious as its impact. In this case: on a tree, and on the life of a person of faith who left behind a legacy of people who had seen the love of God in him every day, and in everything he did.

This is what Jesus wanted Nicodemus to know and to accept: that life with God can make our lives new.

It can restart our lives and send us on to new paths and into new adventures of touching people and the very earth itself with love and goodness.

Jesus wants to transform our lives. He wants to remake, restart our life—turn life into a changed life, an inward and invisible reality with dramatic and obvious out-workings.

Not surprisingly, this is what Lent is all about. It is also what we, Nu’uanu Congregational Church, are also all about because, as we all know, there is a lost and lonely world that is also looking for their *anothen* life. We know this, and we know that God has been providing us an opportunity to do just that. In a little while, after worship, we will have another chance to talk about this and what it means for our church.

In the meantime, let us pray and meditate on what this means for us. As we do, let our hearts and lives come from the shadow of doubt and hesitation, and into the bright light that is leading us forward. Let us worship and give thanks for Christ who leads the way.

Let it be so. Amen.