

## **“By Night”**

**Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, February 2, 2014**

**New Testament Lesson: John 3:1-5**

**Old Testament lesson: Psalm 25:1-5**

A boy and his father were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy said to his father, “Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move this rock?” His father answered, “If you use all your strength, I am sure you can do it.” The boy began to push the rock. Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed and pushed. The rock did not move. Discouraged, he said to his father, “You were wrong, I can’t do it.” The father placed his arm around the boy’s shoulder and said, “No, son, you didn’t use all your strength – you didn’t ask me to help.”<sup>1</sup> This little story points to our reluctance to turn to God for help when faced with impossible situations in our life.

In our New Testament lesson for today, Nicodemus is asked to look to God when faced with impossibilities. As the next person in our sermon series to have an encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus sees the miracles Jesus is can do and asks the question, “Who is this Jesus?” He sees Jesus change water into wine, drive the money changers from the Temple, and do many other signs that John tells of a bit earlier in his Gospel account. Nicodemus sees the signs and because of those signs, he’s convinced that Jesus is sent from God.

Sounds like he’s got it all figured out OK. But does he? Let’s look. He says, “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.” And that’s where Nicodemus’ view of what’s possible in this world flies in the face of who Jesus really is. Watch what Jesus does here. Jesus is about to take Nicodemus’ “We know” statement – we know you are a teacher from God – and throw it right back in his face. When Nicodemus says “we know,” Jesus responds by saying, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

What Jesus is saying is that it’s not the signs he does that have us see him as the incarnation of God’s power and love, but rather it’s the other way around. Our faith and belief in Jesus apart from any signs is what makes it possible for us to see God incarnate – God’s presence – in the world. And furthermore, says Jesus, to see God is to see the impossible made possible, flesh made Spirit. In order to see signs of God, you have to first have faith; it’s as simple as that.

Simple, yet hard, hard for us and hard for Nicodemus. In Nicodemus’ world, signs are what prove his faith and support his beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Wolpe in *Teaching Your Children About God*, as cited in *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, ed. Frederic Brussat and Mary Ann Brussat (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996), 447.

If there are no signs, there is no belief, no faith. And that's just not what Jesus teaches us. Jesus teaches that it is faith that makes it possible for us to see the signs of God's presence all around us. If there is no faith, there is no sign of God, that is, for those of little faith.

In our Prayer of Confession today, we gave voice to many impossibilities in life – impossible jobs, impossible living situations, money problems, conditions at home, and just plain old problems that are – for us – impossible, impossible to face. And what we learn from watching Nicodemus interact with Jesus is that what's impossible for us is in no way impossible for God. In fact, God makes the impossible possible all the time, all around us. We just don't always see it.

For instance, there's the story of the religious woman who, upon waking each morning, would open her front door and scream, "Praise the Lord." This infuriated her atheist neighbor who would always make sure to scream back, "There is no Lord." One morning the atheist overheard his neighbor praying for food. Thinking it would be funny, he went and bought her all sorts of groceries and left them on her porch. The next morning the lady screamed, "Praise the Lord for giving me this food." The neighbor started laughing and screamed, "It wasn't the Lord. It was me." "Praise the Lord," screamed the lady, "for not only giving me food, but making the atheist pay for it!"

God is working miracles all around us – some folks see them, and some don't. Those who see God working in their lives – those who are open to new ways of looking at things, new approaches to old problems, new possibilities when faced with the "impossible" – these are the people who are tapping into the faith embodied by Jesus Christ. While those who can't see what's possible find themselves blocked at every turn. Their certainty of what's what actually blocks their vision of what's possible, of what true faith can accomplish.

Does that ring true for anybody here – our certainty of what's possible and what's not blocking us from what God wants to accomplish in our lives? Sure it does. And Nicodemus is a fine example of it, this inability to see what's possible with God.

Jesus says to Nicodemus that to see clearly what's possible in life one has to be born from above. And Nicodemus has no clue what Jesus is talking about. He says, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answers, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God – (the womb of God's creation) – without being born of water and Spirit." In other words, no one can see what God is up to in life without first becoming a child of God, born of the Spirit. What is it to be born of water and Spirit?

Theologian Peter J. Gomes says that being born of water and Spirit "is literally to begin all over again, to be given a second birth, a second chance. The one who is born again

doesn't all of a sudden get turned into a super-Christian," says Gomes. "To be born again is to enter afresh into the process of spiritual growth. It is to wipe the slate clean. It is to cancel your old mortgage and start again. In other words, you don't have to be always what you have now become." "Such an offer," he says, "is too good to be true for many, (and) confusing for most, but for those who seek to be other than what they are now, who want to be more than the mere accumulation and sum total of their experiences," there is this invitation from Jesus: to be born again – to be born both of water and Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Being born of water refers to our earthly birth – water being an earthly element. And in fact, the place you came from when you were born – a mother's womb – is filled with watery fluid. Being born of the Spirit, however, is to be born of God. And to see what God is really up to in the world takes both; it takes being born of water – you've got to be in the world – and of Spirit – you've got to be in Christ. We've got to be of the flesh and of God. Otherwise, our lives are destined to be forever full of impossibilities.

The most "impossible" obstacles we face are not technological challenges, or even physical limitations and illness, or emotional upheaval, or unwieldy life circumstances. The most debilitating "impossibilities" we face are those that are rooted in the wrong relationships we just won't give up, the hurt emotions we just won't let heal, the bad habits and destructive behaviors we seem to love more than life itself, 'cause we keep doin' 'em, without any possibility to stop, without any possibility to start something new, to turn ourselves over to a new way of behaving.

Every one of us faces some looming "impossibility" in life. The question is what do we do with it, where do we turn for help, what do we expect is possible, and are we open to solutions beyond what we can imagine, from a source outside of ourselves. Are we open to God working in our lives, even working out the impossibilities that you, yourself, are facing?

Wise old Nicodemus was right about one thing: we can't reverse the birthing process. We can't go back into the womb and be born again. But we can go to God and be born again. When you come before God for Communion today, you can be born again, born into a new period of spiritual growth, come away with a deeper sense of faith in God. New life is always possible, always there for us.

Whenever impossibility takes hold of you or someone you know, that's when it's time to open ourselves up to what Jesus is saying about going deeper in the faith. When impossibility strikes, that's when we can strike back, not as people of the flesh, but as a child of God, a child of new possibilities, grounded not in who we are, but in who God is, in Christ Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible With Mind and Heart* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996), 188.

“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” (John 3:16). What is more impossible to imagine than life eternal?

And yet here we are, recipients of this impossible gift from God. We have this gift, we have eternal life, not just in some far off distant future, but here today, and everyday, when we open ourselves up to being born of God again and again, in every moment of our lives, in every situation we face. Those who are open to having God do new things in life are those who encounter, around every corner, ***new life and new possibilities.***

It's not doing impossible signs that proves who Jesus is, but rather it is Jesus who proves who God is: God is commitment to doing the impossible for those who believe. So what do you think? Is it possible for God to take away the impossibility from your life, the impossibility you put in the pages of your pew Bible – or are you going to take that back today? Are you taking that with you, or do you have faith enough to leave it behind, to wipe the slate clean, to step out into a new world of unimaginable, faith-based possibility?

Leave it behind. And if you pick it up again, put it back down. Leave it behind – that impossibility of yours – and let God transform it – transform you – into a new life full of new possibilities. Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Ever-present and faithful God, how often we are neither present nor faithful. We find it hard to be in your presence, for there, we are reminded of our unworthiness.

We find it difficult to be faithful, for the claims of the world are strong. But on this day, we are here to worship in the spirit of new possibilities, for you are worthy of our faith even in the midst of the world's faithlessness.

So we ask for you grace and your mercy, for us and for the world.

It is your presence, Lord, that we lift up our prayers, even as we lift our eyes to you and raise up our voices to your glory, singing the prayer that you taught to us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.