

fall afresh on me

First Congregational Church, Branford

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As we read last week, Jesus passed his temptation tests, which freed him to begin his ministry. In John's Gospel, which doesn't even tell the temptation story, Jesus is baptized, calls his disciples, and then right away performs a miracle at a wedding in Cana, turning water into wine. In John's order of events, which differs from the other gospels, just 3 days after the wedding, Jesus goes to cleanse the temple in Jerusalem, where he overturns the dishonest money changing tables and casts everyone out of there: *stop making my Father's house a marketplace!* So, in John, from the get go, Jesus is in trouble with the Temple leaders, who approved of that Temple practice (and the kickback in their own pockets). When that angry day was done, Jesus spent time with his disciples. One night, soon after, a man named Nicodemus approached Jesus.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, 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.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, *'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?'*

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'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.

'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.

The word of God for the people of God.

Sometimes, when you get real quiet with yourself, do you ever ask, *is this all there is?* Get up, go to work, raise kids, go to bed, then do it all again the next day? Is this it? If you've ever wondered about the meaning of your life, then perhaps you can understand why Nicodemus sought Jesus out.

Nicodemus had it all. He was a partner in his Jerusalem law firm. He had a nice house in the suburbs with a jacuzzi in the master bath. He had a good wife and two high achieving children. He was a pillar of the congregation and a leader in the PTA. And yet, Nicodemus was aware, as he drove his Lexus to work every day, that something was missing. There were times, in the middle of the night, or in a particularly boring meeting with some corporation, that he found himself wondering if this was all there was to life. It's not something he could speak with any of his friends about, and he felt too ashamed to tell his pastor.

But, Nicodemus had heard about this Jesus that *everyone* was talking about (the wedding, the temple cleansing - yes, *everyone* was talking about Jesus), could he talk with him? The problem was Jesus was a controversial figure; it wouldn't do for it to get around that he'd been seen with him. Nicodemus was a respected community leader, after all. He was a Pharisee! If he were to seek out Jesus, it would have to be by night.

As John tells it, it wasn't an easy conversation! Nic and Jesus don't seem to communicate very well. Nicodemus isn't quite sure what he wants to know from Jesus, then Jesus goes: "the truth is that you won't see the kingdom of God unless you are born again." For a literal-minded person like Nic, you can see how confusing that must've been!

The challenge with the gospel of John is that if you want a history of Jesus, or at least a set of rules to follow, you've come to the wrong gospel. John, who is more of a mystic, gives us these long, airy stories filled with symbolism.

Nic just hears alotta woo-woo - he wants Jesus to cut to the chase and just give him a list of seven habits of highly effective people... a *concrete* way to rid himself of these questions he's been having.

But, when Nicodemus asks Jesus who he is, Jesus says before Nic can

understand who Jesus is, *he has to learn a new way of seeing*. Huh?! Nicodemus will have to move beyond what he *thinks* he knows about God - because he thinks he knows *everything*, so that God can *fall afresh on him*. What a thing to say to a Pharisee! Pharisees were members of an ancient Jewish sect that accepted the Mosaic law and emphasized strict observance of high temple practices. They were very religious, and very rule-oriented. Jesus is like, you aren't going to solve your restless heart until you let all those rules go, and let the spirit make you like a newborn baby; vulnerable, trusting, dependent, and hungering for what only God can give.

Nicodemus was as confused as ever. It didn't make sense. This just had to be wrong. And, what Jesus was suggesting was very threatening to lawful, rule-based religion, which wasn't meant to be *up close and personal*. On the second Sunday in Lent, you need to know that Jesus' radical religious views would be a big reason why they'll take him to the cross.

So, what do we get from today's story? I think it's that an encounter with Jesus calls us to turn in a new direction. To have a talk with Jesus in the night might lead you to some new things - he might tell you to trust people more, let go of the fear you're having about something, maybe he'll suggest that you start sharing more personally with others, reach out to the poor, get involved with racial justice, be kinder to your spouse - who knows *what* Jesus might say if you ask him about your life, if you go to him in the night with the questions you're having. If we want to stop wondering what's missing (if it is), we'll invite an encounter with him. He'll open our life anew.

In Christianity's central theme, *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*, we can absolutely perish in our daily life, right in the here and now, times when we're feeling like *is this all there is*. And, we're miserable, and unhappy. That's a red flag. If life has gotten stale, here's an opportunity to go to Spirit like a newborn baby and say... spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Let's say that together... spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

And, let's care for others by saying, spirit of the living God, fall afresh on your world, fall afresh on the United States, fall afresh on Connecticut, fall afresh on Branford, fall afresh on our families, fall afresh on our church. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on *us*.... together... Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us.

One thing's for sure, the Holy Spirit and your new settled minister will bring the spirit anew. So, that will be a different encounter, for sure.

The Lenten Journaling group had an encounter with Jesus Wednesday night,

where members got up close and personal about their faith, their heartbreaks, and their understanding that God often provides our strength through community, through being together. Sometimes we may wonder when we're home alone why we're not given the strength we need, but maybe God wants to give strength in the midst of community, in our sharing about who we are and what we're going through. I left Wednesday's encounter knowing that you are a brave and courageous people who stay loyal to a God who doesn't always act in our timeframe. *And, who isn't always clear.*

And, there's no clear ending with the Nicodemus story. Just sort of, how are you going to respond to the invitation Jesus makes to open up your life to the spirit of God? Will you turn in a new direction so that Spirit can fall afresh on you? Jesus says, all you have to do is admit to the deep hunger that is within you, and be fed by spirit.

We do know this! Nic could've just walked away, convinced that Jesus was not the Messiah, that he was just a woo-woo minister. But, he'd been changed by the encounter! What Jesus said and who Jesus was seeped into him. Because we learn in John 12! that Nicodemus was present at Jesus' crucifixion - a Pharisee! - *and that he helped bury Jesus' body.* Deep down inside, he knew there was more to religion, that he hadn't really opened to the *heart* of it. You always know the truth, don't you?

One more thing - if anyone feels depressed and angry about the world, and all its goings on, lets remember that God doesn't condemn the world - he loves it very much - and he wants to save it through you and me every day... and he can't very well save it through unhappy people. So, if you're angry and miserable, you need to check that, because your love is needed to save the world.

Just as Jesus was lifted up, we need to lift *our heart* above everything that's going on. *It's the open heart that saves* - not the complaining and the worry and the negativity. 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.

Here's to you - and your Lenten encounter. Amen.