

## “How Can These Things Be?”

John 3: 1-17; Isaiah 6: 1-8

To be honest, I can't come in another week, stand behind this pulpit, pretending that everything is okay when in reality....our world is hurting. More and more, it seems like the darkness is no longer creeping in. Rather it is rushing at us full force...another school shooting just weeks after the other one. World leaders posturing, speaking just to taut each other; friends diagnosed with cancer; children living in fear...This, this is the world into which we have been called as Jesus' disciples. This, this is the world into which we are called to go and tell the good news of God's love. Now that the Holy Spirit has come, renewing our souls, settings our hearts on fire,, this broken, hurting, struggling, often hate filled world is the one into which we have been called to go and proclaim release to the captives, good news to the poor. Now that the Holy Spirit has come, for a time such as this, we have been called to go out and proclaim the good news of God's love for all of God's people. To be honest, I'm not sure I have the strength or the courage for such a call right now.

Maybe that's why this sermon was so hard to write. In essence, both of these texts are call stories. Isaiah received his call during a time of instability in Israel. The King had just died. All hope was lost. For a time such as that, God called

Isaiah to go and proclaim justice and mercy. And in John, we meet Nicodemus. Sure, his story doesn't follow the typical pattern of a call story but that is what it is. It just takes him a little longer to answer. Nicodemus doesn't answer the call to proclaim healing and wholeness until after...After he had an opportunity to experience Jesus' teachings, until after he defends Jesus at the synagogue. Nicodemus didn't answer the call to proclaim healing and wholeness until after he laid Jesus' body in the tomb. It wasn't until after the empty tomb that Nicodemus was ready to answer his call.

For a time such as that, after the empty tomb, God called Nicodemus to go and proclaim an eye opening life giving word about God's love. For a time such as this, God calls us to go and break down the old ways of oppression and hurt so that new life, new hope may flourish...and to be honest, I'm not sure I have the strength or the courage for that.

That is until I am reminded over and over again that thankfully, the saving of the world is not up to me. That's God's job, not mine. All I am to do is answer the call. All I am, all we are to do is to go beyond faith in theory to faith in practice. As Jesus disciples in a time such as this, we are called to go beyond words of compassion to compassion in action. We are to become the people God created and calls us to be, the very people this broken and hurting world needs us to be...people who have been transformed by God's redeeming love.

Let me explain: This section in John contains one of the more memorable texts found within our Bible. It contains one of many people's favorite Bible verses. I bet if I just said the words, "For God so loved the world" that anyone, including people not necessarily raised in the church, would be able to complete the next line, with "that he gave his only Son so that we might live". Yet, this section doesn't stop with this one line. It goes on to say... God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son.

<sup>19</sup> "This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil."<sup>20</sup> All who do wicked things hate the light and don't come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. <sup>21</sup> Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God."

This infamous 3:16 verse is part of a larger section. It is part of a larger story. In our text today, John tells us the story of Nicodemus. We know he is a Pharisee and that he is highly respected. John tells that Nicodemus has heard Jesus speak and is compelled to seek him out. He is compelled to search Jesus out, to find out more about what Jesus is talking about when Jesus has taught in the

synagogue. There is just something about this man named Jesus that compels Nicodemus to search him out.

John tells us that Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dark of night. Now let me stop right here and say, For years, the Church has said Nicodemus came to Jesus in the middle of night because he didn't want anyone to know he was looking for Jesus. That's simply not true.

If we remember, John is a master of double meanings when it comes to his Gospel writing. He plays on themes of darkness and light, unbelief and belief. He uses the idea of moving from spiritual blindness to sight being restored to illustrate when someone finally gets just exactly who Jesus is.

So in this case, John has Nicodemus come to see Jesus in the middle of night because that is the darkest point meaning that Nicodemus is still in the unbelief stage. Then they have this crazy conversation, once again, playing on the double meaning of born again. Nicodemus is talking about physical birth while Jesus is talking about spiritual renewal.

John has all this going on because he wants his community, he wants his readers to really think about what it means to be a person of faith, what it means to proclaim belief in Jesus. He wants us to realize that there is more to faith than just knowing the words of Scripture. Faith, belief is also about being in

relationship...being in relationship with God, being in relationship with one another as beloved children of God.

Through this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, John is breaking down the old ways of understanding and practice faith, transforming them into something new. John wants his community, wants us to see that faith in Jesus is also a calling. It is also a way of being. John wants us to become the people God created and calls us to be by living out this eye opening, life giving proclamation of God's redeeming love in all we do and in all we say.

In other words...back when this text was written, and no surprise, still now, the world was and is in crisis. And for a time such as this, when all hope seems lost, when darkness seems to be taking over, we know something that this world doesn't know. We know that our God is still creating, still moving, still calling us as Jesus' disciples to go out and put compassion into action.

You see, Isaiah's story, Nicodemus' story, even our story as people of faith is about personal transformation. Our journeys of faith, our growth as disciples is about moving from faith in theory to faith in practice. It is about knowing something with our minds and then experiencing it with our hearts. Answering the call, being a person of faith is about moving from curiosity about this man we call Jesus to committing ourselves to living out his teachings in all we do and say.

Or let me say it this way...It has been a pretty crazy week. Not only has it been the end of the school year and all that goes with that, it has also been a whirlwind week for us as a community of faith. On Tuesday, Dan and Adele made the trek to Evansville, In to pick up the bench for Northside. And I have to say as weird as it sounds, I have never seen a community more excited about a bench. It is a bench. But on Wednesday, when it was delivered, you would have thought Dan and Adele were delivering a priceless artifact.

But the funny thing is that this was so much more than a bench. I heard comments from so many people about how wonderful it was for the community to come together for the school, how blown away people were about the generosity of this community of faith, how fascinated people were about the process of taking 400 lbs of plastic bottle caps and turning them into a bench. The whole adventure became one more way faith moved beyond just being a theory to something we practice in our community.

But the craziness didn't stop there. On Thursday morning, I was in a conference call with Blessed Tomorrow about what the process will look like as we take up the mantle of becoming the first carbon-neutral congregation in the United States. We talked about what this will mean and how this one call to action will hopefully have ripple effects not only in our community but across our state and country as well. We talked about what we are already doing and what steps we

as a community of faith will need to take. And at the end of the conversation, the director of Blessed Tomorrow said, “I hope you realize the importance of what accepting this call means. It will show lots of other people what exactly can be done when people embrace putting their faith in action.”

I have to tell you in the midst of all the craziness of last week, these are the words which have stayed with me. All week, as I kept hearing news reports of the brokenness and hurt which is happening in this world right now, I couldn't help but think...that in a time such as this, for God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son so that all may have eternal life. That God did this so that not one person may perish but all may be saved. And in response to this life changing, living giving gift, as Jesus disciples we are called to put our faith into action so that all may see the light of God in our midst, so that all may experience God's redeeming love. Now that is something we can easily do as the people of God. Amen.