

Starting Over

[John 3: 1-17]

K Karpen, Sunday, February 20, 2005

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Nicodemus said to Jesus, "How can these things be?"

The story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night and asking him questions and being asked questions in return is a great story. It is also one of the central texts of the Christian faith. It is a text frequently quoted. "You must be born from above," (or "you must be born again" or "You must be radically reconceived.")

"The wind blows where it wills." "For God so loved the world that God gave the only son." It is a text with many associations.

It is a text frequently taken out of context. How often have you seen those John 3:16 signs held up at baseball or football games, as though that one sentence were a perfect panacea for the ills of life or a perfect summation of the Christian message?

And it is a text oh so frequently misunderstood, misapplied, abused, and distorted. Well, we're not going to fix all that today, are we? All I want to do for these few short minutes this morning is to take a fresh look at the central theme of the text, what I think is the central theme, at least, and to consider what the text could mean to us if we were willing to take it seriously.

For me, this is a text about the difference between living at a distance from God and living in God's presence, in the middle of the swirl of God's mess. Between living apart from God and living surrounded by God. That is what Jesus is talking about here, and it's *all* Jesus is talking about here.

Jesus is challenging Nicodemus and us with the difference between living your life the way you've always lived it, and starting over. Starting over. Going back to square one, point A, age zero, and trying it again in complete & total relationship with God. That's an intimidating proposal. It is for me. I don't know how to do it!

It implies that nice as I am, smart as I am, spiritual as I am, successful as I am, I'd be a whole lot better off to chuck it all out, get over myself, and start over with a radically reoriented relationship with the One who made me.

It's no wonder Nicodemus willfully misunderstands what Jesus is saying to him. He's a good guy; successful, smart, spiritual. Why should he start over? Why should he be radically reconceived? Why should he go back to square one?

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Jesus doesn't tell him he has to be reborn. He just tells him that without emptying himself and without returning to the One who made him, he'll never catch a glimpse of what God's kingdom is all about. He'll never find eternal life, which to Jesus means not heaven or something by & by once you die, but life now in the eternal, timeless, limitless presence of God.

We all have rich, full lives. That's part of our problem. We're full! It's like when you go out to eat and you're so hungry you dive for the bread plate, and when your entrée finally comes you're full! Trouble is, you're full of bread.

Jesus recognized that about Nicodemus. He was full! He was successful and satisfied. He was full! Sure there was something missing, but there was no room for what was missing! He was full! But he was full of bread. Ultimately, he was full of himself. And that was fine, but it left no room for God. It left no room for living now in the eternal, timeless, limitless presence of God.

You've got to start over, says Jesus. You need to be reborn. You need to be born from above. You need to be born from God. You need to be re-conceived. You need to be radically re-conceived. In the presence of God.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. In John's gospel, the night—the darkness—is always a spiritual state, an existential state. It tells where he was at, not where he was or when he was there. Where he was at was night, was darkness, was dimness.

Where he was at was distant from God. Where he was at was separated from God. He was successful! He was respected! He was on his way! But he was on his own. He was in the darkness. And he knew it.

In Jesus' mind, that's what Nicodemus had going for him! He knew where he was; he was in the darkness. He knew where he was starting from. And you need to know where you're starting from, if you're going to start over.

Friday morning we went to Central Park to take a look at "The Gates." We started at Columbus Circle, walked into the park until we found a high rock, and stood atop it, gazing around us at the billowing sea of orange.

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There was a girl up on a rock standing near us, a teenager, and she was of course talking on her cell phone. And we caught just a phrase of her conversation as she walked by. She said, somewhat puzzled, "You're standing right beside *which* gate?" And it was clear that her partner didn't know, couldn't say, couldn't describe it.

We're like that. Mostly. We may know we need to start over, but we're all too full of ourselves to make room for God; to make room for the spirit. And we don't quite know where it is we're starting from. "We're by some big, orange gate."

The good news is, God knows. God knows. God knows whether it's gate 6273 or 6279. And if we're ready to get over ourselves, if we're ready to be radically re-conceived, if we're ready to start over, we'll find that God is already there at our gate ahead of us, ready for us, at the gate. At our starting gate. Ready to have us begin living now in the eternal presence of God.

Why? Because God so loved the world that God, too was willing to give everything up and start over. Let's pray.