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First Congregational Church of Blue Hill
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Psalm 121, Jn 3:1-17

Signs of the Times

Last Sunday, which was the first Sunday of Lent, our scriptures took us into the wilderness with Jesus while he was tempted to betray the purpose of his call from God to be the world's redeemer. No self-respecting devil, then or now, would tempt anyone with things that would knowingly lead to their ruin, and Satan was in great form when approaching Jesus. The temptations to Jesus were to perform signs that would provide incontrovertible truth to the world that he is the Messiah – turning stones into bread (and along the way, ending human hunger, which must have been a REAL temptation for him), throwing himself off the top of the Jerusalem Temple and being rescued by divine beings in the full sight of all (it sure would have been tempting for there to be NO doubt in anyone's mind about who he is), and having dominion over all the earth – how tempting to reorder all our ways, to keep us out of our wars, to save us from con men and pedophiles and folks who commit every heinous deed, even while reporting to Satan. In short, Jesus is tempted to perform SIGNS that would leave the world with proof about who he was. There would never again be questions of faith, of belief. But he does not accept Satan's bait. The people of the world must come to faith through the evolution of their own faith, and not through a great sign that eradicates the necessity of BELIEF and relies instead on rational observation. There are plenty of philosophies and spiritualities that are based on that, then and now.

In today's scripture passage we meet Nicodemus, a respected member of the religious leadership, who comes to Jesus under the cover of night. He's been watching the amazing deeds of Jesus – water into wine, the cleansing of the Temple – and he thinks that these are signs. He wants Jesus to confirm his suspicion that Jesus is a lot more than the most recent wonder-worker to come along. Jesus tells him, "You are right that these have been crucial actions, but you need to think a lot bigger, or you wouldn't be coming to me for confirmation in the first place. You are thinking about all that you are experiencing through the lens of human experience, human observation,

and that is VERY limited. To really understand, you need to be born from above – to see things from a REAL faith perspective, even from God’s perspective, and that’s a wholly different way to experience every moment of life.” Nicodemus pushes back – he says, yeah, but I was truly and successfully brought into this world by the woman who gave me birth. What – am I supposed, as a grown person, to force open my mother’s body and come out of her again?” So Jesus elaborates, that there are two ways of viewing all of life, death, reality, experience, faith. One is from the human experience of having been brought into the world by human parents, which might lead to living one’s life by rational observation. The other is by experiencing a transformation initiated by FAITH, a transformation that is so total that it re-centers ALL of how a person experiences being alive, about dying, God, the cosmos, everything. I am reminded of when, in Mark’s gospel, Jesus tells his disciples for the first time that he will be betrayed and executed, and Peter can’t take it. This is all too appalling! And Peter takes Jesus aside and gives him a piece of his mind for saying something so wrong, and so antithetical to this whole movement they have going of a Jewish restoration to power and the vanquishing of every enemy – political and spiritual. And Jesus rebukes Peter back saying, “Get behind ME, Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Satan indeed! This goes back to that temptation in the desert when Satan thought that worldly glory might be enough for Jesus. No. Peter, our direct forebear in the faith, couldn’t yet understand the amazing, universe-altering words of Jesus because he was thinking like a rational human, in the small boxes with which we order our universe, and in which power and success **don’t** equate to suffering, rejection, and execution. He doesn’t yet have the faith to understand God’s use of these human experiences on the path to divine glory and redemption. So, too, Nicodemus presents himself to Jesus as a person who is on the right path, but who is still really rooted in a triumphalistic, human understanding of God’s whole project of redemption.

Nicodemus and Peter are focused on their hopes for a very earthly salvation, about a transformation of their society, and Jesus is talking about an initial transformation of SELF. Like them, we might say, “I’ve worked very hard on this SELF, thank you very much! Not done with that project, but I’ve come to the place where all that I see confirms that I am right in all my beliefs! Lovely.” But the real spiritual

transformation of ourselves is actually hard work, much harder than telling others how to live, which has been the focus of many who follow Jesus through the last 2,000 years.

Jesus teaches Nicodemus that discipleship – and all of faith – are a both/and – about body and spirit, about this lower physical world in which we live and the upper story that is heaven, centered around God (this is a central dualism in John’s Gospel, lower and upper spheres). The heavenly sphere is one of life, light, truth, freedom and abundance. This isn’t a separate sphere from the lower, physical world, for they are conjoined, inseparable, one obvious, in front of our faces, and the other not, although right in front of our hearts, and working on our souls. The sooner we recognize that fact of the heavenly sphere, the more authentically we’ll live the life that really is life. The sooner we give our hearts over to full belief, the sooner we will join that heavenly sphere while our feet are rooted to the earthly one below. We who are marinating in this world need the revelation that comes from heaven. That means not a vague spirituality, it isn’t about feeling good, it’s revealed by believing in Jesus. It means having the eyes to see that the wind that first blew over the waters in the creation of the cosmos is the same Spirit that blows through our hearts today and calls us to be people of both heavenly and earthly citizenship. Jesus tries to encourage Nicodemus by saying, essentially, “You know how well you understand the wind of creation? THAT is the Spirit that I’m talking about! They are one and the same! You are on the path! Keep your heart open.”

Many people, in Jesus’ day and in our own, come to Jesus hoping to be affirmed in who they are and NOT to be turned upside down, but that is what faith in Jesus does. It takes the mundane perspective that we have about the workings of our daily lives and balances it (it doesn’t replace it, it complements it) with a heaven-centered perspective. It blows open our ability to see the truths around us. We become so much larger than our own agendas. We experience the fundamental challenge of new solidarities with all humans, especially people who are quite unlike us. We are made to question our allegiances and priorities. We are commanded to see every human as a sibling, starting with those whom we feel quite legitimate in judging to be lower than ourselves. Faith is about our knowledge and love, which is what many are seeking – a deepening of human experience, but Christian faith is so much more about our **being** known and loved by God in the first place, and then drawn into holy mystery, and about our KNOWING that!

Nicodemus will be undone, unraveled, by his encounter with Christ. His certainties will be eroded as he opens to a real understanding of the Spirit's presence in his life, in the world, in the cosmos, all pointing to the life after life. That unraveling will open him to an understanding of the presence of the Spirit, the blowing wind, in and through and all around him and far beyond. He will accept the gift of Christ's love and thus be gifted with new life, even the life that really is life. He will grow into a full acceptance of Jesus Christ, then a full identification with him. After Jesus's hideous execution he will join Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus' body for burial.

May we, likewise, be born again, this time from above. May we accept Christ's redeeming project of love and transformation, a project intended to gift us with new life, even the life that really is life, and even right now, before we pass into the eternity of Spirit and of Creation's wind. It's this transformation that can give us birth into the truth that we are missing now – that the God who loved the cosmos into being now loves it into redemption. The great sign of this, in every time, is Jesus.

Amen.