

Lent 2 (A)
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Text: John 3:1-17

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While we were in Santa Barbara last week, Melinda and I both received several warnings on our phones about gale force winds out over the ocean near the Channel Islands. Fortunately for us, we never got much more than some strong, gusty breezes, but I wondered what it would be like to be out on the ocean, with your boat being driven by the wind—uncontrollable, pushing you to who knows where. I wondered about anyone trying to sail around the Channel Islands with the winds whipping by at 60, 70, 80 miles per hour. It made me glad to be safe and sound in our cozy little hotel room.

In our gospel story for today, Jesus uses the image of wind to picture the work of God's Spirit. And I imagine that, rather than a gentle, refreshing spring breeze, Jesus has in mind something closer to those gale force winds over the ocean. The Spirit is a force that can do more than blow us in a direction we never intended to go. The Spirit of God is able to blow us to a destination we never intended to go to, into another world altogether—a world where people respond to being hurt with forgiveness, and where they pray for their enemies rather than strike out at them or plot revenge against them. It's a world where people are true to their word and faithful to their marriage vows; where people don't view others with envy or jealousy or resentment; a world where no one is excluded or shunned, and everyone has enough. In other words, it's a world very unlike the one we're accustomed to living in, but truly the world we most deeply long to live in. And the surprising and wonderful part is this: the Spirit can blow our hearts into that new and beautiful world, even while we continue to inhabit this one, with the result that we begin to act as though it was normal in this world to forgive, and pray for enemies, and live compassionately, and faithfully, and all the rest.

Our gospel story for today, about when Nicodemus met Jesus, invites us to recognize the work of God's Spirit in our lives. When Nicodemus sought Jesus out late at night, he knew there was something special about Jesus, although at the time he didn't know the half of it. He only knew that what Jesus was doing was powerful, and it was connected to God somehow. And I wonder if sometimes it's similar for us—there may be a lot about God and Religion and Church that we have questions about, or maybe even have serious reservations about. But there's something about Jesus—about his way of forgiveness and compassion; about his way of humility and welcoming people who are broken or hurting or confused or wounded, people who have been excluded or judged by others; Jesus makes space for them, healing space, life-giving space. There's something about Jesus that we are drawn to, something that is absolutely compelling. The world Jesus lives in is the world we want to live in too.

So Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a question that isn't really a question—We know that you are teacher who has come from God. And Jesus' response is completely confusing to Nicodemus—and maybe it's confusing to us as well. But this is a wonderful window into how the Gospel of John tells the story of Jesus. Often, when we read John's story, we'll hear how people misunderstood Jesus and were truly confounded by the things he said. But out of that

misunderstanding, Jesus is able to take us as readers to a deeper understanding of the spiritual life. That's exactly what happens in our reading for today. In the translation on the back of our bulletin, Jesus says, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above"—or perhaps you're familiar with the older translation: One must be born anew, or born again, in order to see the kingdom of God. So which is it? Born from above? Or born again?

The misunderstanding begins with an intentional ambiguity in Jesus' choice of words. There's simply no expression in English that can adequately capture all the nuances of the Greek word our gospel writer uses to describe the sort of birth that is necessary for seeing the kingdom of God. It can mean "from above," or "anew," or "again." In our story, Nicodemus latches onto the meaning, "again," and reacts to the impossibility of him, as a fully grown adult, returning to his mother's womb to be born a second time. A colleague shared what happened when he asked his 9-year-old daughter whether her 3-year-old brother could return to his mother's belly to be born all over again. She howled with laughter, "Nooo! He wouldn't fit, and plus he couldn't see anything!" Being born again, born a second time, is... ridiculous.

Unfortunately, Nicodemus misses the sense of being born "from above," or "anew," which means that he can't understand Jesus at all. Nicodemus can't understand that a person who is a good, solid citizen of this world, who is satisfied with the world the way it is, who doesn't long for the world to be different, such a person will never be able to see the reign of God. God's way of love and forgiveness and compassion will seem to be only nonsense and weakness to such a person, until the Spirit blows through their life with something like gale force winds and rearranges everything. And when the Spirit blows through their life like that, it will overturn everything they thought they knew. They may feel as though they're starting life all over, as though they have a completely brand-spanking-new life. It's like they've been born again, except that it's not just a repetition of their same old life. It's like they've been given a new life, one that is "from above," given by God. With this new life, we look at people the way God looks at people—with compassion and mercy and love. A person who's been born anew will find it impossible to be satisfied with the world the way it is. They will have a new perspective, a whole new set of values and priorities and concerns. When the Spirit gets ahold of you, you can't easily go back to the life you had, because the Spirit will help you imagine God's future, which is so beautiful that it will haunt you if don't keep pushing toward it, pushing to make your life conform to that future of forgiveness and compassion and peace.

In the church, we talk about baptism as the way in which the Spirit gets ahold of us and blows into our lives. Here, in this water, we are born anew, born from above, born of water and the Spirit. And when we are born of water and the Spirit, we become part of a whole family of people where God's Spirit is at work. We become related to a community of people where the Spirit is alive and active, blowing into our lives through our worship, through the Word, and through the examples we see around us of how to live with compassion, live with forgiveness, and humility and service. And there's even more. This new life takes us a whole lifetime to grow into. Every day we return to the truth of our baptism, and let that truth rearrange everything. People of God, the Spirit has begun something new in you, something beautiful and powerful. God's Spirit is working to shape the life of Jesus in you, to heal every wound and raise you up to

be strong in love, strong in forgiveness, strong in compassion, so that God can make a difference in the world through you. Thanks be to God. Amen