

One of Us

Psalm 121, John 3: 1-17

Lent 2

Mar 8, 2020

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?

My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

John 3: 1-17

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.

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For decades ABC’s Wide World of Sports was on every Saturday, and a clip from their opening scenes became a familiar yet painful icon. The announcer said, “the agony of defeat,” just as a man attempting a ski jump – and in apparently very good form as he heads down for the jump—suddenly tumbles head over heels and off to the side, bounces off of a supporting structure, and then tumbles down to the snow below. We see him fall, we can almost hear bones breaking, we imagine that his Olympic dreams are as broken as he is. We grimace when he tumbles, we groan when he lands. It is almost as though we were experiencing the heartbreaking

experience with him. It hurts to watch, yet at some point or another we have all seen this classic TV moment, this agony of defeat.

So I was incredibly surprised not too long ago to learn that this agony of defeat was *not* an accidental, career-ending tumble. In fact, the ski jumper *intentionally* pulled himself off the slope to catapult over the side. He chose to fall rather than to finish the jump.

When interviewed about it, he said that the jump surface had become too fast so as continued down he realized that if he finished the jump he would complete it beyond the safe landing zone at the base of the run, and that could literally have fatal consequences.

What we have long seen as a bone-breaking, Olympic dream ending accident, was in fact, a carefully controlled fall that left him with no injuries other than a headache. What appeared to be an accident, a problem, was actually a planned action, a change of direction, that saved him.

As the ski jumper showed us all, to change our course in life can be a dramatic and startling undertaking, but change is better than a fatal landing in the end.

Nicodemus had his own path that was going incredibly well, until he veered off that path and onto a change of direction. As a Pharisee, a superior, affluent, Jewish leader who strictly observed the traditional and written law and opposed Jesus' ministry as undermining their ways and beliefs, Nicodemus was a proud, dedicated member of the Sanhedrin - the Jewish court of religious law and court of public opinion. Nicodemus had many reasons to keep his lifestyle and status quo. He was admired, respected, wealthy and well-known. Life was good, in fact, life was great. And it would be even better if this radical teacher and his followers would just go away.

Yet at night Nicodemus had other thoughts, thoughts that undermined everything he knew and believed. In the shadows of the night he could not help himself from rethinking Jesus' message, especially as there were so many signs. It challenged everything he knew, believed in and loved, yet this Jesus and his teachings haunted him. Jesus may be dangerous, but he turned water into wine, healed many from lifelong afflictions, and fed thousands with just a few scraps.

Nicodemus began his change of direction by realizing this heretic Jesus was a man sent from God, and he had to see more for himself. Yet to do so was to take an enormous risk personally and professionally. He was already perched on top of a slippery slope just having the thoughts he turned over again and again in his mind. He risked everything, he risked his reputation, his integrity, his family, his friends, his wealth, yet the inner questions demanded attention, demanded answers.

In the middle of the night, hidden in the shadows and with a guarantee that there would be no crowds to see him, he came to Jesus to understand more of what he had to say as he wanted to somehow reconcile that with his own life.

Perhaps the words of the psalmist encouraged him, "The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore."

Nicodemus asked his carefully worded rhetorical questions, and received answers that were more like riddles, yet so full of insight and truth. '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.' He heard firsthand that Jesus was not just a man of God, but the very Son of God, sent to give God's beloved world eternal life.

Nicodemus learned that despite all that he had—materially, as well as the wonderful intangibles—it was for him a slope that was leading him in a way that was not the right way after all. To land safely at the end, he would have to intentionally catapult himself from his way to the way of Jesus. Beyond our Scripture lesson this morning, Nicodemus does just that. In time he

will encourage a hearing for Jesus before being judged without evidence, and he is with Joseph of Arimathea to prepare the body of Jesus for burial.

As Nicodemus showed us all, to change our course in life can be a dramatic and startling undertaking, but change is better than a fatal landing in the end.

Nicodemus was many things, including one of us. He was curious to know his part in God's story, just as we are. We too have questions we are afraid to ask in the light of day, the doubts we are afraid to share in public, the feelings of being silly for believing in a God that the world does not see as we do.

Like Nicodemus, we have all had those nights where we reach out to Jesus with our questions, our need for insight and for answers, for understanding and direction. We come to Jesus with things that we hold in the shadows of our lives.

What riddles about faith, life, humanity, do you wish you understood better...or at all?

Are there faith teachings that are more radical than you want to accept?

What do you ask Jesus about in the middle of the night as you find yourself changing the course of your life?

Amen.