

## **Worship for Guildwood Community Presbyterian Church, March 22, 2020**

Dear Friends,

This is some of the material for worship, had we been having communal worship on Sunday, March 22, 2020. For a hymn – pick your favourite hymn about the Holy Spirit. Thinking of all of you during these interesting days and praying you will all stay well.

Rev. Helen Smith

### **Prayers of Adoration and Confession**

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Compassionate God, as a child is slowly formed in the waters of the womb, so we are changed by the Spirit who broods over us. Yours is the labour that propels us into the light, yours the arms that embrace us from birth to old age. All praise we give to you, O God, for you have borne us and carried us.

You invite us to new life in the Spirit. We wonder what our friends will think if we are too serious about matters of faith. Sometimes we insulate our lives against the wind and turn away from the witness of those who speak knowingly of spiritual matters. Sometimes we are afraid and doubting. Other times we want to feel the winds of your Spirit, but we don't want to be blown off our feet. We want life on our terms. We want to play your part, O God. But the role is too big for us. Forgive us, God. Help us to yield our lives to you. We pray in the name of Jesus, and continue to pray together as he taught,

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.  
your kingdom come, your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those  
who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours  
now and forever. Amen.

### **Declaration of pardon**

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**Leader:** Hear the good news! Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us. ([Romans 8:34](#)).

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel.

**PEOPLE: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!**

### **The Peace**

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The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ, particularly in these uncertain times, fill your hearts and minds. Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid.

## Scripture

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[John 3: 1-17](#)

## Sermon

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Nicodemus is a big cheese.

He has it all.

He has it made in the shade —

he is a very important person —

a Pharisee, a person of rigorous piety, devotion to God.

Religious Leader,

no doubt one of the 70 occupying a seat

on the council of elders – the Sanhedrin.

He is the Establishment —

and he has heard about what Jesus was up to in Jerusalem —

This charismatic rabbi who has attracted such a following,

this rabble rouser

who literally whipped this year's Passover festivities into a frenzy

by driving the money changers from the temple –

this miracle worker

who was doing many signs and wonders throughout Jerusalem

Nicodemus has heard enough about this maverick teacher

to make him think he ought to pay him a visit and find out more.

Could it be that Nicodemus,

despite his prestige in the society,

his knowledge of the law and the prophets,

his adherence to the faith,

senses a gnawing emptiness in his inmost being?

Some 400 years later, St. Augustine of Hippo would write;

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord,

and our hearts are restless until they rest in you”.

In 1600's Blaise Pascal,

mathematician and Christian philosopher (interesting combination)

wrote:

“There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person,

and it can never be filled by any created thing.

It can only be filled by God, made known through Jesus Christ.”

Maybe Nicodemus doesn't have it all.

So Nicodemus comes to meet with Jesus —  
However, as a Very Important Person with a big theological reputation to uphold,  
he decides it might be just as well to pay this visit at night.  
Better to be at least fairly safe than to be sorry, he thinks,  
and waits till he thinks his neighbours are all asleep.  
“We” he says to Jesus,  
as in “we” the folks who run the show around here.  
“We know you are a teacher who has come from God.”  
And having said this, Nicodemus waits,  
carefully watching to see how Jesus will respond.  
Will the new rabbi fit in with the rest of the teachers, elders, and priests —  
the religious establishment in Jerusalem?  
Or was that stunt at the temple evidence of a lone ranger  
intent on bucking the system?  
And what is it about this man that attracts so many?  
Why do people leave their old lives and come, follow him?

At first Jesus was fairly patient —  
What the whole thing boils down to, he says,  
is that unless you get born again, you might as well give up —  
“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God  
unless he is born again”  
That’s all very well, Nicodemus says,  
but just how are you supposed to pull a thing like that off?  
How especially are you supposed to pull it off if you are pushing seventy?  
How do you get born again  
when it is a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning?  
He even gets a little sarcastic —  
“Could a man” enter a second time into his mothers’ womb,” he asks,  
when it was all he could do to enter a taxi  
without the driver’s coming around  
to give him a shove from behind?

To Nicodemus it sounds like a bad riddle.  
Re-entering the womb is a physical impossibility.  
But even as the Pharisee protests, Jesus persists,  
“I tell you the truth. No one can enter the kingdom of God  
without being born of water and the Spirit.  
Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

You should not be surprised at me saying  
You must be born again ...”

and here is where we need to read those fine print foot notes in our Bibles

— or a variety of versions —

[NRSV](#) – footnoted here in [NIV](#) –

The crucial word in Greek is anōthen.

You must be born anōthen.

It means either “from above” or “again”.

The ambiguity seems deliberate.

For when Nicodemus obsesses

over the physical impossibility of this event,

Jesus pushes the envelope.

“Listen closely,” says Jesus, “Yes, born again.

But this is not a physical rebirth, not a second trip through life.

I am talking about being born from above — born of the Spirit.”

And a gust of wind happens to whistle down the chimney at that point,

making the dying embers burst into flame,

and Jesus says being born again is like that.

It isn’t something we do —

The wind did it —

The Spirit does it.

It is something that happens, for God’s sake.

It is an image that suggests we have little choice in the matter.

Many people treat the question, “Are you born again?”

as if it involves making a decision for God.

Yet babies do not decide to be born.

The central feature of this image that Jesus uses,

that Nicodemus is having such trouble getting his head around,

seems to preclude our active role in the process.

Instead, God is the primary player.

And Nicodemus still doesn’t get it.

So set in the establishment way of doing things —

all up to individuals to appease an angry God,

to earn brownie points with God —

“How can this be?” he says —

and that’s when Jesus lets him have it.

Maybe Nicodemus had six honorary doctorates  
and half a column in Who's Who, Jesus says,  
but if he couldn't see something as plain  
as the nose on his face,  
he'd better go back to kindergarten.

"I'm telling you like it is," Jesus says.

"I'm telling you what I've seen.

I'm telling you there are people in hospices  
moving around with the love-light in their eyes.

I'm telling you there are ex-cons teaching Sunday School.

I'm telling you there are alcoholics no longer filled with spirits  
but overflowing with the Holy Spirit,  
there are undertakers scared silly we'll put them out of business.

Jesus says:

"I'm telling you God's got such a thing for this messed up planet  
that he's sent me down  
so if you don't believe your own eyes,  
then maybe you'll believe mine,  
maybe you'll believe me,  
maybe you won't come sneaking around  
scared half to death in the dark any more  
but will come to, will come clean,  
will come to life — life in abundance  
which is what I came to give."

You may have noticed that Matthew and Luke have stories  
that focus on the events leading up to the birth of Jesus.

John focuses on the spiritual birth of the Christian.

What does that look like?

How can we detect the presence of the Spirit in someone's life?

That seems to be a difficult question to answer.

It is an elusive thing,

Jesus tells Nicodemus,

for like the wind, you cannot see the gusts of air themselves  
but only hear the results of their passing presence.

Perhaps then, being born from above

is something that can only be discerned over time.

I'm thinking that after Nicodemus hears [John 3: 16 & 17](#) —

Those words about God loving the world so much,

that he sent Jesus  
that the world might ultimately be saved through him  
I'm thinking that Nicodemus' own breathing quickens and his heart pounds  
and he hasn't felt like that since his first child was born,  
or the time they'd told him he didn't have lung cancer  
but just a touch of the flu.

Because 18 months later

[John 7: 50-52](#) — there is a great row in the Sanhedrin.

The Pharisees are demanding that the temple guards imprison Jesus.

One of their own number,

Nicodemus, speaks up and defends Jesus,

“I don't think our law condemns

without first hearing him

to find out what he is doing.”

And some time later, ([John 19: 38-42](#))

when Jesus is crucified, after he declares “It is finished”, and dies,

after his body is removed from the cross,

Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus, with Pilate's permission,

comes and takes the body away.

Nicodemus is with him —

indeed Nicodemus brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes,

75 pounds of it — today's dollars \$200,000.

And taking Jesus body,

Nicodemus and Joseph lovingly wrap it

with the spices in linen cloths,

according to the burial custom of the Jews.

Nicodemus no longer hides under the dark of night —

he pays his last respects in broad daylight.

It was a crazy thing to do,

what with the witch-hunt that was going on —

but he decided it was more than worth it.

And I'm thinking that when he heard the next day

that some of the disciples had seen Jesus alive again

he wept like a newborn baby.

## **Prayer following the sermon**

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We praise you for the shocking miraculous truth, God,  
that we can be born again; and that daily you welcome us into a surprising new life,  
the wonderful, creative, unpredictable world of your Spirit;  
and that all we need do is allow ourselves to be pushed - birthed, by your grace,  
into new experiences of your reign.

Here we are, O God;  
Let us be, once more, in this moment, in this place,  
Born yet again. AMEN

## **Prayers of the Thanksgiving and Hope**

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God of Nicodemus, we pray with thanksgiving and hope.  
We pray for all the people in this world, especially . . .  
we pray with thanksgiving and hope for those in positions of power,  
those who lead us . . .  
for those working in the health care system . . .  
for the women and men who work daily  
for the safety of brothers and sisters and neighbours . . .

Birth us all anew, O God;  
hear us and help us on our journey.     [*Silence*]

We pray with thanksgiving and hope for your Church  
for your Church universal, and for the part of it that is Guildwood.  
We give thanks for the Session, the Care Team, the Search Committee  
for all who are working to keep us connected through phone calls,  
Tidbits, the website.

Give us all the faith to act on what we do not always understand.  
Bless us to be a blessing to everyone in your Name  
Birth us all anew, O God;  
hear us and help us on our journey.     [*Silence*]

We pray for those of us who are searching for a deeper meaning to our lives  
we pray for all those who long for a new beginning:  
those who are imprisoned,  
those who are estranged,  
those who are self isolating to keep us all safe  
and those who are ill or infirm, especially . . .  
Give us all new life by the power of your Spirit.  
Help us to see how we can be present to others  
while maintaining the self distancing of these days.

Birth us all anew, O God;  
hear us and help us on our journey.     [*Silence*]

Birth us all anew, O God.  
Hear us and help us on our journey.  
Help us to grow up again,  
    to accept not only earthly things but heavenly things,  
    to lift up your Son and be lifted up ourselves,  
    to let your Spirit move us beyond our understanding.  
God of Nicodemus and all of us,  
    hear us and help us  
even as surely as the Spirit blows among us,  
    to continue the work of your Son.     AMEN

### **Benediction**

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May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen ([Romans 15:13](#))