

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

May 27, 2018; Trinity Sunday, Year B

Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3: 1-17

“Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’”

John 3:3

He comes to Jesus by night. Wrapped in his cloak, slipping swiftly through the shadowy backstreets of Jerusalem: chances are good no one will see him. He’s a Pharisee: a leader of his faith, a highly respected member of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin. But when this distinguished personage comes to see Jesus, he dares to travel only by night.

Members of the Sanhedrin don’t frequent the run-down neighborhood where Jesus is staying: especially not after dark. But the Pharisee Nicodemus has a passion that draws him to that place, a passion rare in his (or any) age — a passion for the truth.

Jesus is a controversial figure. Nicodemus’ fellow Pharisees would have paid him little mind — were it not for the crowd at his heels: the motley assortment of down-and-outers and ne’er-do-wells, the type of riff-raff of which revolutions are made. Nicodemus could stand to lose a lot of credibility with his fellow-leaders, were he to be identified too closely with the Jesus movement.

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

Yet, Nicodemus is a man of principles. He finds Jesus' entourage unsettling, but there's something about his teaching that fascinates him. He can't condemn this man out of hand. He's got to talk with him first.

And so Nicodemus arrives at the door of the house. He's got his opening line worked out in advance: a little flattery. "Rabbi," says he, "we know that you are a teacher sent from God; for who could perform such miracles without God's blessing?"

Jesus doesn't take the bait. He offers his visitor no genteel smile, no social pleasantries: just a look of the eye that seems to Nicodemus to pierce his soul.

After a long few seconds, Jesus speaks. His words are opaque: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above."

A peculiar saying. The Pharisee is baffled. How is it possible, Nicodemus asks, to enter the womb a second time and be born?

Nicodemus has mis-heard Jesus. The Greek word John has Jesus using is *anōthen* — meaning "from above," or "from top to bottom." It's the same word used in the Good Friday reading, to describe the rending of the Temple veil from top to bottom. What Nicodemus *thought* he heard Jesus say was "you must be born again."

Now, you've all heard of "born again" Christians. It's a strange thing, but

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

many of the people who teach this passage and spend so much energy encouraging others to be “born again” are actually following Nicodemus in his misunderstanding, rather than focusing on what Jesus actually says.

Billy Graham, by the way, “whose name was for many years strongly associated with the phrase “born again,” actually stopped using it in the latter years of his ministry. He spoke, then, of being “born from above,” just like Jesus says.

This being “born from above” is not something Nicodemus can do a thing about. That’s got to be hard for him to accept: because he’s spent his whole life trying to make himself holy through his religious practice. “Just live a good life,” the Pharisees taught. “We can show you how. Do the right thing. Pay your spiritual dues. When you get to heaven, God will honor that.”

A variation of Nicodemus’ theology remains very popular today: “Just be a nice person. God likes nice people, and will reward you in the end.”

I happen to like nice people, and I’ll bet you do, too. But Jesus says that’s not the point. This experience of being born from above is not something you or I or anyone else can make happen. It comes from above, so it’s beyond our control.

Just look at the image Jesus uses next. He likens the divine birth experience to the wind — *ruach* in the Hebrew, which also happens to be the same word for “Spirit”:

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

“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 of everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus sits there in his fringed prayer shawl — symbol of an intricate and obscure discipline of obedience — and we have to wonder if he does get the point. That’s how the conversation ends: hanging, inconclusive. Was Jesus’ distinguished visitor convinced? John tells us nothing — at least not here.

Anyone who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, as I did, is familiar with the phrase, “marching to a different drummer.” The phrase actually comes from Henry David Thoreau’s famous wilderness diary, *Walden*:

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

All those nonconformist flower children in the Sixties just loved that quote. They weren’t being odd or strange. They were just marching to a different drummer.

“Drum” is a fascinating word, if you think about it. It’s an example of what the English teachers call “onomatopoeia.” An onomatopoeia is a word that sounds like the thing it represents.

Drum... drum... drum. Sounds like a drumbeat, doesn’t it? It’s the experience

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

first, before it's even a word.

There's another thing about drumbeats. They replicate heartbeats. To be captivated by the rhythm of a drum is to connect with another person, heart to heart.

There's one more thing about drums I'd like you to notice. Drumbeats cause us to move. Who hasn't listened to a drumbeat — whether from a jazz band or the marching band at a football game — and felt the compulsion to tap one's toe at the very least, or (who knows?) even to get up and dance?

I read something the other day about marching to a different drummer.¹ It's a story that makes me think about Nicodemus, and what it would have been like for him, had he truly taken Jesus seriously in that night-time encounter.

It was told by a man who was out walking one day with his son, Adam, who was 12 years old. Adam's dad was separated from his wife, Adam's mother, so he was catching up on what was new in his son's life. One of those things was learning how to play the drums.

The two of them came to a highway overpass, one of those places where homeless people find shelter. "Dad," said Adam, "I want to show you one of my

¹<https://www.servicespace.org/blog/view.php?id=23034>

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

drum teachers.” Whereupon he led his astounded father under the bridge, where the homeless people lived.

“This is Ken,” he said. “He’s teaching me how to play the drums.”

Well, Ken looked a little unkempt, but it turned out he was a former high school music teacher, of all things. He’d run into some personal problems and had lost his job, his home, his marriage — everything. But he did know how to teach music. And he’d gathered together a group of neighborhood kids to teach them how to play the drums.

Adam’s father realized, in that moment, that Ken looked rather happy with his life under the bridge — happier than he felt with his own life at the moment.

Ken pulled out a drum and began beating it with his hands. “This is the heartbeat that’s always present,” he explained. “The heartbeat of ourselves; the heartbeat of our lives.”

Adam picked up another drum and started playing along with him.

“Fast forward about 20 years,” his dad writes....

“What does Adam do now? He’s a music teacher in San Francisco. He goes to schools in all different neighborhoods. He says sometimes it’s very chaotic, especially in the poor neighborhoods. Some of the kids are homeless, or they’re not sure where their parents are going to be; there is so much going on in those kids’ lives. And the way he teaches kids how to play the drums is he walks into the room. Then, rather than stand up in front of the room and instruct them — rather than say, ‘Here’s

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

what music is about. Here's the C scale. Here's the D scale.' — he just sits in the room and watches the kids run around and throw stuff at each other and do what they do.

Then, he starts beating the drum.

Eventually, the kids pick up on beating the drums. And they find the beat that holds them together. That's how he starts his music lessons."

There's nothing wrong with the teaching of music theory. It's something any serious musician must reckon with, sooner or later. But no one starts there. They start with the beat of the drum.

Nicodemus was a music-theory kind of guy. But somewhere, in the midst of all his diligent scholarship, his carefully-constructed piety, he'd lost track of the most essential thing. Jesus knew this about him: which is why he said he must be born, not from his own efforts, but "from above." For this Pharisee, it was more important for him to learn not from the orderly march of Hebrew characters across the pages of the Talmud, but by listening to the wind, that seems to come from nowhere and to go nowhere, but which simply is, in the fleeting moment of the here and now.

In teaching Nicodemus how to draw closer to God, Jesus uses an image that

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

positively guarantees that he cease his frantic doing and start simply being.

That image is that of being born. If there's one accomplishment in life none of us do on our own, it's being born. We burst into this world screaming and kicking — perceptions confused, eyesight blurred, thoroughly dependent upon others for everything. If the process of coming to God is like being born, then how can of us possibly arrange for it to happen? It's a holy mystery, an awe-inspiring gift. And in the Presbyterian Church we have a whole sacrament to help us remember that: the sacrament of baptism. In our tradition, it's most of often babies who are baptized, not full-grown adults (though we'll do that to, if a new member of the church has never been baptized before). But the norm is infant baptism.

The reason we do it that way is because we take Jesus' words about being "born from above" very seriously indeed. Infant baptism is a potent symbol that the wind of God's Spirit starts blowing through our lives before we have anything to say about it!

We are such high achievers, most of us: such do-it-yourselfers, such rugged individualists. We desire to work out *our own* salvation, thank you — not "with fear and trembling," as Paul advises in Philippians 2:12, but with full assurance that we've done it right the first time. "Give me a good, practical sermon, preacher...tell me step by step what I have to do, and I'll do it!"

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

Today, though, I'm bringing you the most impractical sermon imaginable. There's no practice or technique, in being born from above. It's a holy mystery, how God comes into our lives. It's probably different for each one of us. It's the wind of the Spirit. It's divine grace.

For some of us, it happens suddenly, as a conversion experience. For others it happens gradually, imperceptibly, over the course of many years of Christian nurture. You can split a rock with a thunderbolt, or you can wear it away by the incessant action of a flowing stream. Either way, the result is the same. Either way, being reborn in Christ is a mystery.

But what of old Nicodemus? As I mentioned earlier, John leaves us hanging, at the end of chapter 3. Did Nicodemus ever get Jesus' point?

Well we're not entirely sure, but John does give us two hints. He mentions Nicodemus two other times.

The first is when the chief priests and the scribes are plotting against Jesus. Nicodemus stands up in the council and argues for fairness; he insists that due process be followed. Not a ringing endorsement, exactly — but it reveals a sympathetic heart.

The real evidence, though, comes near the end of John's gospel. Jesus has

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

been crucified, and his fearful disciples have scattered to the four winds. No one dares to come forward, at first, to claim the body. But then, two unlikely people show up. The first is a man named Joseph of Arimathea, who offers the loan of his own tomb.

And the other? Why, it's Nicodemus, that cautious Pharisee. *Nicodemus* is the one who stands up and puts himself in harm's way. He goes with Joseph to anoint Jesus' body for burial. The Romans surely notice: but he doesn't care. He carries on his back one hundred pounds of embalming spices: an extravagant amount, far more than what's needed. In a time when it's risky to confess loyalty to Jesus, it's Nicodemus — who does, it seems, hear that distant drummer after all — who walks the streets of Jerusalem not in darkness, but in broad daylight. On his back he carries back a weighty bundle, one hundred pounds of devotion.

Nicodemus has come into the light.

As must we all, if we're to be serious about being his disciples. We need not only to hear that distant drumbeat, but to start marching to it, in ways that others can see.

Some of us first heard that drumbeat long ago. Others, more recently. But we can all stand to hear it again: and not only to hear it, but to allow its rhythms to invade our very being. To give ourselves over to it. To commit — or recommit —

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

ourselves to walking through this world not as casual travelers, but as disciples.

“This is our story, this is our song: praising our Savior, all the day long.”

Let’s sing it, and let’s make of this next hymn a prayer of dedication!

Copyright © 2018 by Carlos E. Wilton. All rights reserved.