
Old but New

John 3:1-17

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 12, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

I grew up in the Church and when I say ‘Church’ I mean more than just going to church. I was raised in a Christian household. I’m a PK. A problem kid, a party kid, a peculiar kid, a preacher’s kid. I was born in a musical family so the hymns of the Church are on the iPod of my daily life. If and when I quote scripture, many times it’s in God’s language, the King James Version. Not only did I attend church on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday night, and Friday night for youth group, I sang in the choir and as an eight or nine-year-old, I was the character ‘Twinkle’ in a children’s cantata (Oh the things one has to go through as a PK). I went to Sunday school every Sunday and actually loved it. I still remember fondly, Sis. Tucker, my 80-year-old Sunday school teacher when I was in elementary school. During Sunday evening worship, I sat in the back and people-watched and I loved looking at all of the purple hair. Sometimes, I was the sound man in the sound booth in the back of the sanctuary on those evenings—we had sound issues then just like we do here sometimes, revealing that there is nothing new under the sun.

Fast forward to seminary where we get professionalized for ministry to pastoring a church in Switzerland to doing music ministry in a church in Toronto to pulpit supply in a small Presbyterian church in Newark, New Jersey, while teaching on the faculty of Princeton Seminary. Biblical studies, church history, systematic and constructive theology, ethics, practical theology and the arts of ministry. Been there, done that.

I know “the old, old story/Of unseen things above/Of Jesus and his glory/Of Jesus and his love.” I may not create a poster and write John 3:16 on it for a football game, but I know the King James version of it—“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” I’ve been baptized, catechized, communionized, scripturalized, and liturgitized. As a PK, I was churchified, But the Church and all related holy things can become so familiar that faith can become so stale and old. So stale that we become numb to any kind of newness. One might say, “I can tell the old, old story, but for some reason, I don’t know if I’m living it or if it’s living in me anymore. I can memorize Bible verses but they have no real meaning. I know Christianese but I’m not sure I know Jesus.” The Christian life can just feel old and out of touch. The same routine, the same ritual without the reality of redemption. It’s so easy to bury the old, old story because it seems so outdated.

But it doesn’t have to be that way, right? We don’t have to throw out the old. John 3:16 is what Martin Luther called “the gospel in brief.” As a PK, I can yawn my way through that verse but that wasn’t the case for educator, humanitarian, civil rights activist, and presidential advisor Mary MacLeod Bethune. She was very close with Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt. She grew up in the Jim Crow South and might be best known for starting a private school for African Americans in Daytona Beach, Florida, which later became Bethune-Cookman University. She recounts how her

teacher “had a box of Bibles and texts, and [she said] she gave me one of each for my very own. That same day the teacher opened the Bible to John 3:16, and read: ‘For God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ With these words the scales fell from my eyes [she says] and the light came flooding in. My sense of inferiority, my fear of handicaps, dropped away. ‘Whosoever’ it said. No Jew nor Gentile, no Catholic nor Protestant, no black nor white; just ‘whosoever.’ It meant that I, a humble Negro girl, had just as much chance as anybody in the sight and love of God. These words stored up a battery of faith and confidence and determination in my heart, which has not failed me to this day.” Bethune was blessed by those few words of scripture. Something so ancient, so old, as those words of holy script, can be experienced as new. We may think that’s just another Bible verse but for someone else, it’s life because the wind blows where it chooses.

We can even view these pieces of artwork by French artist Georges Rouault from his *Miserere et Guerre* series begun during World War I and they mean nothing because all we see is the suffering Jesus and we think we know the old, old story. What new can really come from these old images? The art on the bulletin cover is called ‘Jesus despised,’ *Jésus honni*, the first image in this particular series. It’s old news that Jesus was despised and rejected, a man of suffering and sorrows. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” A crown of thorns is on his head. One interpreter says you see the wasteland of the earth in this piece of art. We know this old story and some just yawn when they hear it or see it. I don’t see a wasteland of the earth, I see the backdrop as the wind blowing for the wind blows where it chooses and sometimes it blows you where you would never imagine. In this image, the wind blows around Jesus in this lonesome valley of despair. The wind, the spirit, is there even around the suffering of Christ.

So as with scripture, when you return to a passage over and over again, many times you might see something different, something new, never observed before by you. The same is true with reading art. Rouault even said, “One is never finished seeing and watching...Our eyes are the door of the spirit and the light of the mind.” So when you look at this image, it’s Jesus, but every time you look at it on another day at another time, you may see something new, something different, because you are different and the day and time are different.

Look at how his body is light because he is the light but the contour of his body is dark. The darkness cannot overcome him. But there’s always light and darkness in the world. And as Jesus bows his head in shame and agony under the burden of the world, he gazes down at a dark blotch in the bottom right hand corner and as he does, he sees the darkness that is and is to come on his journey. His eye is on the sparrow, we sing, but Rouault shows us that in this moment his eye is on the darkness. He faces it and hangs his head, knowing that even though he is the light, he has to confront the darkness. There’s no way around it. As you continue to study this artwork, you’ll see new angles on the suffering Jesus but almost at every turn, you will have to face the darkness so prevalent in this art.

And here we are in Lent where you will have to face the darkness. The liturgical season of Lent is another place in the spiritual journey where it may seem old and stale. It comes every year so we may yawn our way through it. All of the talk about the wilderness doesn’t worry us. And perhaps the

darkness of the season doesn't either. We're used to it. We know the old story. It's what the liturgiologists have taught for years. It's *pro forma*, the usual, the normal for liturgically-minded Christians.

But it was anything but normal for Nicodemus. He goes to Jesus "by night" perhaps suggesting he didn't want to be noticed because he was a leader of the Jews. He was on the DL, the down low, about his belief in Jesus. He didn't understand everything that was going on, so he was also in the dark in his own way. Yet remember the resurrection scene later in John happens "while it was still dark." Though people loved darkness rather than light, we're told, not all darkness is destructive in John. Nicodemus finds life "by night."

In the night light of Jesus, you travel the path of Lent and it may be dark but perhaps it is through the darkness that you will see things more clearly. You will see yourself, perhaps, for who you really are and for how things really are. Maybe it is at midnight, while it is still dark, like Paul and Silas in prison, where your liberation will come because resurrections don't only happen in the daytime. There's something to be learned in the Lenten wilderness, through struggle, in suffering and in sorrow. Rouault claimed that people lived in the "old district of long suffering" (see plate 5). Lent, in fact, may be the midwife we need in order to be born again as something new can arise in the old liturgical season of Lent because the wind blows where it chooses.

The wind will blow at night but you have to engage the darkness and not be afraid to encounter Jesus by night in your midnight. Writer Susanna Howard works with dementia patients, people who are predominantly defined by irrevocable losses of neurological function like the loss of speech, language, identity, and mind. In her project called, *Living Words*, Howard captures the words of people suffering with dementia, a condition that could be deemed an existential Lent and lament. She affirms every word and sound that's uttered from these patients. Some of the words may seem like nonsense to the sophisticated sensical but there's actually something more present in this "old district of long suffering." We shouldn't write off people who are suffering in body or mind. At times, those with dementia will use words, according to Howard, that wouldn't be used in ordinary conversation: Statements like "Everything was all packed up and plopped over with"; "These people, into the third act"; "Some round here are all embers"; "They don't say much this tribe." When these patients don't find the "right" word they might use replacement words without realizing it. Some see only loss when looking at these patients, but Howard sees lives to be honored. All deemed darkness is not evil because light does also shine at night. Howard believed that a life is a life and should be embraced. She believed that "only through engaging in the darkness do we see who we really are and glimpse what this life is." When she finished her first collection of poems by a woman with advanced dementia, the woman took her hand and said, "Now you know two worlds, the one outside and the one inside in me and you must go and tell all the people."⁵ After receiving this great commission to go, that's exactly what Howard has done. On the surface, those with dementia may be dissed and dismissed but for Susanna Howard it was a gift gained under the cover of darkness. A disability doesn't disable God for the wind blows where it chooses. So-called loss is not a disgrace; it might be a grace in the night. What we deem a kind of death, might actually be a new birth.

Through the Lenten darkness, one may be born again. I'm not talking about Christians who set up a spiritual hierarchy and refer to themselves as "born again Christians" compared to other Christians who are something else and perhaps not true Christians at all. In fact, to be a Christian is to be born again, born from above—a time of birth, again, and a place from where the new birth is initiated, from above. Both meanings are relevant. But just as babies don't decide to be born, we don't either. God gives birth to us through the midwife of the Spirit and we are born of the Spirit. This includes every Christian believer, not a special class of "born again" Christians. And because we are born from above, every believer is to understand faith as a gift from God, not a human achievement that we can add to our trophy case. At this birth, we receive the gift of life as grace, without our decision, without getting to vote on it. We can only be grateful for it. John understands the mystery of conversion and salvation as this kind of divine grace. There is grace, even for Nicodemus, at night. Nicodemus thinks Jesus is talking about a physical birth. "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Of course, Jesus is speaking of a spiritual birth but it almost seems as if Nicodemus has given up on old people or everything that is considered old. If so, he's given up on new life altogether.

And the truth is you are never too old to be born again, to start over, to have a new beginning and a fresh start. You may be old or things may be old yet all things can be new. Perhaps the word of God in Isaiah speaks to us today: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." The wind will blow even in your "old district of long suffering" in your dark night of Lent. With God, it's never too late to be reborn. Your relationships, your career, your health, all may have grown stale, old, but there is new life in Christ.

I can say this because I believe in the wind, the Spirit, the breath of God. "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." A lot of the spiritual life is mysterious. Even the great Nicodemus didn't understand. You feel the wind. You hear the wind but it blows where it wills and when it wills. We are not in control of the wind and you don't know from where it comes or where it goes. You may not be sure what's happening or where you're headed like Abram who is called to go from his country and family to the unknown, only knowing that he will be blessed and be a blessing (Gen 12). That's the wind at work. Some in the academy have the impostor syndrome in which one feels as if they don't belong. They don't think they are smart enough, cultured enough, not enough of this or that in their background, therefore they don't mount up to a particular standard created in their own mind. They have no idea what they're doing here or how they got here. They only know that they are here in an unknown academic land. But remember the wind chooses and you just blow where the wind blows. Nicodemus hears that the Son of Man will be lifted up, but he has no idea that he will be present to bury Jesus when he dies. The wind will blow where it chooses and blow him back into Jesus' life at the end. People and memories will blow back into your life unexpectedly and you don't choose or control this.

The wind is as ancient, as old, as the creation and as new as every day. It is uncontrollable therefore give yourself to the wind not only for rebirth in your spiritual life but to have the future God desires for you. You will hear the sound. You will hear the still small voice. You will feel it but you may never know exactly what is going on and that is because we aren't God. But something is happening

in your life—trust it. You can't see the wind but you can see its effects. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galat 5). Eternal life. A new creation. God so loved the world. God so loved you that God sent Jesus and the wind. It's still blowing. Do you hear the sound?