



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
3-12-17

Living here in the west we've probably all heard about the defensive tactic of "circling our wagons" –when the people traveling into new territory would make a circle of their covered wagons and then all gather/sleep inside of that circle – ready to defend themselves against any enemies or dangers from outside.

So let's imagine the Pharisees circling their wagons. The Pharisees were a large religious group within the Jewish faith tradition. During the time period of this gospel we are aware of two other major groups in Judaism – the Essenes and the Sadducees. Each of these groups had their own religious traditions and teachings and identities. The ones we hear of most in our Bible are the Pharisees of which Nicodemus is one of their leaders. Now the Pharisees are noted for their scholarly study of Jewish traditions, of the Jewish law, for demanding adherence to their authoritative interpretations of that law, and adherence to the worship traditions and purity of their lifestyle. So, back to circling the wagons as a Pharisee.

Here they are as a people of the flesh – using their heads, their hearts, their bodies to figure out God, to develop their understanding of truth, to become defenders of a religious tradition. Nicodemus had done his studying, he knows what God wanted from God's children, BUT- But

Here comes Jesus.....Jesus filled with signs of the presence of God, Jesus living as a teacher from God. Jesus – not a Pharisee.How can these things be? Asks Nicodemus. So Jesus tells him about the Spirit – God's spirit – that spirit that flows right past the defenses of the wagons, right through our heads, our hearts, filling our bodies with no help from us. There is no stopping the Spirit of God – it goes where it chooses and brings new life. And listen to the life that Jesus points to in this reading – from Isaiah – "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.....Nicodemus is starting in the dark – but that light has come. "You must be born from above – when God gives birth to creation – we are all part of it. And when Jesus speaks of the breath or the wind – it is Sophia – wisdom, God's spirit indwelling in each of us, reminding us that the Lord our God is the one God, the only God come to all people, bringing healing – just like Moses would lift up a serpent figure on a pole to offer healing, so Jesus is come to offer healing and love, the essence of God is that saving love.

And that just blows Nicodemus away, changes his life. He comes to Jesus confused and questioning, he comes with his set identity and Jesus is willing to begin with Nicodemus right where he is – visiting with him, being patient, using the scripture to connect with the life

Nicodemus knew, offering mercy, reminding him of a way of salvation that brings light, mercy, love...not condemnation.

I love to think of the Holy Spirit slipping right through our very best defenses. I like to imagine religious authorities getting wound up with their defense of the “truth”, having fervor that they know the eternal truths, that they have God and scripture and holiness all figured out.....the wagons are circled and here comes the spirit -----blowing right around those words, those ideas, those teachings-whispering away the mightiest of human strongholds. Ah what a spirit – that spirit of mercy, of peace, of love. That spirit that is reality more than gross matter; that spirit that affirms that we are not merely fleshly bodies, hard heads and hearts, meat machines. Our Christian theology says that we are creations within the Spirit and this Spirit, like the wind is out of our control and comprehension... No wonder Nicodemus was bewildered. No wonder he cried out, “How can these things be???” We are defenseless with the Holy Spirit...We do not get to choose what the Spirit may bring us, or how it will touch us???? And isn't that exciting? Isn't that amazing? It means that no matter where we stand, the Spirit will wash over us and if we are bewildered and vulnerable and uncertain and humble.....that's just right where we should be. Right where we should be.

I would never place my trust in someone who says that they've figured God out. I'd never want to place my trust in any religious authority who says they are here to defend the truth, or that they have the answersthey've circled their wagons but it is no defense that will hold. God will be God – the heavenly things surpassing the earthly things and placing my trust in the mystery of the incarnation, in the presence of the Spirit, in the depths of mercy and love.....that will save me from certainty and fill me with life.

Which by the way filled Nicodemus also. Later in the book of John we learned that he spoke out against judging Jesus – telling the other Pharisees to listen before judging, and he serves the disciples – offering the spices to anoint Jesus when Jesus dies. I think he figures things out.....it rather appears that it was worth it to pay a visit to Jesus.

Thanks be to God.