

Feast of the Holy Trinity (B/RCL)  
John 3.1-21  
June 7, 2009  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

“Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.” Ben Franklin wrote that, and he was obviously an early bird, not a night owl. Because of that proverb, people who eat dinner at 10 p.m., pay bills at midnight or watch TV at 2 in the morning may be seen in a less than favorable light. Some people think it’s less virtuous to stay up late than to go to bed early. They think it’s a sign of laziness to sleep later than anybody else in the family, even if you also went to bed later. Slug-a-beds is one term for those who rise after the sun – and it’s not a compliment!

We don’t know if Nicodemus was a night person or not. We just know that on at least one occasion he came to Jesus by night so that nobody else would see him. He visited under cover of darkness so that his friends and fellow Pharisees wouldn’t judge him for seeking Jesus out, when they were trying to discredit Him.

In St. John’s Gospel, day is good; night is bad. Light is good; darkness is bad. After describing how Judas left the Last Supper to go betray Jesus, St. John writes:

“And it was night.” (John 13.30b)

Night was the time of day claimed by the prince of this world, Satan. Night was the occasion for betrayal. Nicodemus’ night visit to Jesus meant he was frightened, not bold, dabbling in faith, not stepping out in it.

In his defense, I would like to say that Nicodemus must have been a pretty smart cookie, to be a Pharisee. He had to be able to read and understand the Law, know how to cross every T and dot every I. He showed his spiritual insight when he told Jesus he realized He was a teacher sent from God, when he declared Jesus could only perform those powerful signs with God’s

blessing. But Jesus didn't affirm Nicodemus for being wise. Instead, Jesus said something I find mysterious:

Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. (John 3.3)

Like a lot of other people in St. John's Gospel, Nicodemus takes Jesus very literally and asks,

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?” (John 3.4a)

Listen to the question again:

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?” (John 3.4a)

Can a leopard change its spots? Can an old dog learn new tricks? Is there anything new under the sun?

The angel Gabriel's words to the Virgin Mary come to my mind and heart, whenever I wonder if miracles can still happen. Mary questioned how she could become pregnant, given her circumstances, and the angel simply said,

“Nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1.37)

A long time before, God had said something similar to Abram, the husband of Sarai, who had been childless for longer than most of us have been alive, and who had just been told she would bear a son in her old age. God asked Abram straight out,

“Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?” (Genesis 18.14a)

Strange things happen on God's watch. Last week we heard about how the Holy Spirit arrived in a whoosh of wind and tongues of flame on the first Pentecost. The phenomena of fire and flame were nothing compared to the courage that filled believers' hearts on that day, though. Those men and women who had been cowering behind locked doors, not emerging by day **or** night, burst forth and became nearly unrecognizable in their bold proclamation about what God had done in Jesus Christ.

Who knows just **how** that happens?? We can't pick up the Holy Spirit on radar, track the Spirit's movement like radio-isotopes on a nuclear body scan. Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is like the wind, mysteriously appearing, then disappearing, its presence only perceptible by the effect it has. The Holy Spirit transforms:

- Cowardice into courage
- Unbelief into faith
- Apathy into love
- Chaos into order
- Death into life
- Disobedience into obedience

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?”

“Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?”

“Nothing will be impossible with God.”

Do you remember Nicodemus came to Jesus by night to avoid the criticism of his peers, the other Pharisees? He wasn't just being paranoid. Later on in St. John's Gospel, there's a second reference to Nicodemus. This time the religious leaders were discussing how outrageous it was that the temple police hadn't arrested Jesus. Nicodemus reminded them of due process, of the age-old protocol of conducting a hearing before judging anyone. Their response was one of contempt. They basically said, “So, are you one of **them** now??” (John 7.50-52) Nicodemus was slowly being born again after having grown old. He had found the courage to speak on Jesus' behalf in the light of day.

The third and last time we hear of Nicodemus in St. John's Gospel is the day of the crucifixion. After Jesus died, Joseph of Arimathea approached Pilate for permission to remove Jesus' body from the cross and bury it. Guess who helped him carry Jesus' body to the tomb, probably sometime around dusk? Our friend Nicodemus who had first visited Jesus by night,

now helped to bury him. He brought along “a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds” (John 19.39), burial spices fit for a king.... Such a gift would not go unnoticed. Nicodemus was no longer a secret follower, for fear of the Jews. The Holy Spirit had worked a miracle of faith in him, and he was born again after having grown old.

I don't know what transformation God wants to work in you. I don't know what the Holy Spirit wants to blow into your life or burn out of it. I do know this: no matter how poor you think the odds are that God can bring life out of death, hope out of despair, faith out of doubt, love out of apathy, forgiveness out of anger, new beginnings out of painful endings, in **your** life:

“Nothing will be impossible with God.”

It is possible to be born again after having grown old. Ask Nicodemus. Amen

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