**Sermon John 3: 1-15**

**3 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”3 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.4 “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”5 Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. 10 “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? 11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”**

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**I sometimes wonder how it would be if Jesus returned, if he came into our time, our life, to our Church today. How would he look like, what would he say? Would I recognize him, would I accept him?**

**It is to be expected that he would not come with shoulder long hair, a white robe and sandals on his feet – he would not make it thus easy for us.**

**But Jesus in a suit, with shirt and tie? That seems strange as well.**

**Which church would he visit first? Would he feel at home with the Baptists? Or would he start with the Catholics? May be he would even be a Jehovah Witness? May be he would really start his work in the Protestant church. May be in one of the large congregations here in Atlanta – or- may be but probably not here in the small chapel of Redeemer where German speaking and German loving people worship together?**

**If Jesus came back, then we could assume in any case that his preaching would be radical even today and absolutely loving. Many things that we teach and believe would, I think, not be able to stand before his claims of ultimate truth. He would wipe all our hesitations based on practicality and plausibility off the table. Our questions of economics as well and may be even our narrow minded zeal for justice that always demands: “What he has I have to have too” or that warns us: "If you give to one, you have to give to all.” His sermons would be unsettling, also for me, as they were new back then and shook things up.**

**How would we as church respond to Christ coming back? We can look back at a selection of several persons claiming to be the Messiah. There were several who claimed of themselves that they had to move and reign the world. Unfortunately they mostly only brought war and conflict. They were not Jesus, definitely not, they were mistaken. How would the church react if Jesus came back? It is true that we can look back at a certain number of Messiahs, or those who were claiming that of themselves. There were several who thought they had to move and rule the world. Unfortunately they only brought destruction and conflict. They were not Jesus, definitely not, they were mistaken about their calling and mission, and most of them were simply mentally ill. When Jesus came back, he would need to be prepared for quite a bit of skepticism with me and with all representatives of the church. We would have to watch very closely and check everything deeply.**

**That is how Nicodemus felt who we heard about in our text today when he comes to Jesus at night. He is a member of the High Counsel of Israel, which is comparable with a Bishop’s position. He heard about Jesus and he could not let go of the matter. His colleagues and brothers in faith are more than skeptical, yet Nicodemus wants to go to the bottom of things. He goes about it carefully and diplomatically. He does pretty well with this stranger from Nazareth.**

**The Kingdom of God. Nicodemus shares Jesus’s expectation of this ancient Jewish belief that this world that is filled with injustice, hatred and violence – that this world is not God’s last word and that he will establish his reign over this world. A world where people only live according to God’s law. A world that won’t have tears or suffering anymore, a world that will offer us the fullness of life.**

**I don’t know if you noticed when listening to our gospel story: Jesus does not answer him. They talk completely passed each other. Is this impolite or intentional? As you have this story in the Gospel of John, we can explain this strange communication pattern a little bit. John does this a lot, that the Divine and the Human just does not come together. According to John Jesus is so much God, so far removed at times from the world, that there have to be misunderstandings. That is why Jesus and Nicodemus talk passed each other, and yet they talk about the same matter.**

**Nicodemus wants to know. He wants to know what is going on. He wants to know what this Jesus is about. And then he wants to form his opinion about him. Yet Jesus says over and over in the gospel of John: “You cannot know. This is not how to approach the message. You cannot get it just with your intellect. Your arguments don’t really reach what I am saying. You need to experience, feel and be moved. It needs to capture you, touch you and even change you. You need to be born again, become a new person, become a different person – then you will know what I am talking about.**

**To start anew from the very beginning! Have you possibly thought about that at times? What would be if… What if I had decided differently back then…What if I had not said that, what if I had not done that back then... What if?**

**To start anew. To leave the old behind and start without baggage. Maybe Nicodemus wanted that. To start from scratch. To do things differently than they were and are customary.**

**Often this wish comes up when life does not go so well. When one’s own strength is exhausted or seems too small. When the situation seems without hope. When relationships have gotten too negative or stuck. Do you know the saying: “I feel like a new person” (I feel like having a second chance in life). Have you had that happen that you had a situation in which you said: “I feel like a new person”? When might people talk like this?**

**May be when a long conflict that divided people deeply was overcome as one party was able to reach out their hand and say: “I am sorry. I want to clear the air between us and make a new beginning.”**

**Or somebody has fought against an illness, has experienced weeks of helplessness and weakness, until the doctor says one day: “You are healed!” This creates a feeling as if a second chance, a new life is being given.**

**In German we say “I feel like a new born”. We know this saying and Jesus knew it as well. And he used it in our conversation with Nicodemus.**

**Yes, Nicodemus knows the hope and the teaching about God’s kingdom. And just like Jesus he is waiting for it. However, right now as he stands before the one who embodies how God’s Kingdom will be like – now face to face with Jesus, Nicodemus reaches his limits.**

**Jesus says, only the person who will be born again can see the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus does not understand and asks: “How can a person be born again when he is old?”**

**The Greek word for “anew” can mean two things. It can mean: “to be born again” and it can mean “to be born from above”. Nicodemus therefore means to be born again, while Jesus talks about being born from above. Nicodemus says: “I can’t do that”. Jesus says: “You don’t need to, God can. God can free you from your past. God gifts you with a new beginning.”**

**“The wind blows where it wants to, and you hear it blowing, yet you do not know where it comes from and where it goes. This is how it is with every person who is born from the Spirit.” In this sentence, in this image we can come closer to what Jesus is talking about: “You cannot hold onto God, yet you can feel God”. Or how a famous theologian Rudolf Bultmann once said: "We can only describe God based on what he does with and within us – more we do not know”. He sums up our sermon text for today: “We can only describe and speak about God based on what he does with us and within us.”**

**If Jesus came back today – I don’t want to speak on behalf of the other churches, but in the Protestant church for sure, he would set off a fire: Synods and conferences would meet and talk about this theme, there would be assessments made, theological and for sure psychiatric ones. Many conversations would be held and conventions called. We would listen to all our church members, and they would surely let us know their opinion.**

**Also, we know that for example developing a new worship agenda in the Protestant Church in Germany took about 14 years until it was finally officially introduced. And that was in comparison with Jesus returning a harmless story. If it came to Jesus, I could imagine it would take about double as long, may be even longer for the Church to respond officially. One could imagine that Jesus would find that somewhat difficult… On the other hand, it is quite understandable and maybe there is no other way: The last time when the Church became enthusiastic without thinking was when they followed a leader, a Messiah who was not only mentally ill, but who was also evil. When the Church declared Adolf Hitler as their leader, they committed an unforgettable and possibly unforgivable error. Therefore, we have to check and double check, look, think, reflect today, this I am sure of. Nicodemus, even though he is being corrected by Jesus, he is justified in being skeptical.**

**If Jesus came back today – many would approach him possibly with questions and accusations: “Where were you when I was suffering?” “Where were you when my child died?” “How can you allow that there is so much injustice in this world?” “Why do the evil often live a good life, while good people are suffering?”**

**If Jesus came back- the worst scenario would be that nobody could get through to him. He would be surrounded by the media, thousands of people in need would crowd around him, people who have tried everything else, people who only have one hope: Him. They would travel from all around the globe. Wherever he was, thousands would follow him, many more than back then in the small country of Israel. Many logistical problems would arise. He would need professional management, speaker systems, stages and tents. Even at nights he would need bodyguards around him – Nicodemus would not have the chance to come to him and talk to him without causing a commotion.**

**We recognize as we imagine this scenario of Jesus today, we don’t get anywhere. We just lose sight of him. Him, who came to offer healing and who came to bring good News.**

**We lose sight of God. We lose sight of hope. We lose sight of what is essential and really matters. Just as Nicodemus we stand wondering and somewhat lost in front of the question who Jesus is, and start seeing problems that are not really important.**

**“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit”. You could also say: “We can only say of God, what he does with and within us.”**

**“The wind blows wherever it pleases” means: We don’t always have control over how strong our faith is. We can’t make our trust in God grow based on our own efforts alone. We cannot “produce” faith neither by repeating doctrines nor by following certain practices and dogma.**

**On the other hand: Exactly then when our own strengths and abilities come to an end, when we reach our limits, when we lose hope and don’t have much courage left, that is then that God sends us God’s Spirit that strengthens us.**

**By sending his Spirit God wants to quench our thirst for a fulfilled life. That is how God wants to renew our courage to face life. That is how God wants to strengthen us in our relationship with him.**

**And this is how faith is: What God does with and within us, we cannot understand with our intellect and we can’t fully comprehend with our thoughts. More so, we experience God’s Spirit, we feel it in our heart and experience God in our daily life. One or the other among us could even share about experiences of godly miracles, yet we don’t talk about those, as the skeptical looks of others don’t get and don’t match the amazing experiences we have made with God in our life.**

**And this is how it feels: When God sends his Spirit and we experience God’s presence in our life, then we are like children, and in finding a second naïveté we develop trust. We don’t worry all the time what is happening, we develop trust that we are in good hands and that all will be well, even with those things that burden us.**

**And again this is how it feels: When God sends the Spirit, it feels like a quiet breath, a tender touch, like a good word just at the needed and right time, like a smile that opens our heart.**

**We can call what God does with and within us “Blessing” – which is God’s gracious reaching out to us, his sometimes lost, skeptical and oh so smart human “Children”.**

**And this is what Jesus was about. This is what he gives to us: experience, touch, love, and blessing. The assurance of God being close. `**

**Don’t be astonished. When God’s creative Spirit works with and within a person so that he becomes a new person (as if he was “newly born”) then you can only be astonished.**

**Just as Nicodemus. Suddenly he disappears and is not being mentioned anymore in the conversation Jesus and him were having. Later, he suddenly appears when the Pharisees arrest Jesus and accuse him. At that moment Nicodemus shows up and insists that they need to listen to a person before convicting him. He had listened and knew that if you let Jesus talk incredible and amazing things could be heard. Later when Jesus had died on the cross, Nicodemus shows up once again and shows his connection with deceased by bringing costly oils and embalming Jesus’s body with those oils.**

**We don’t know what happened with Nicodemus internally. However, twice he showed that Jesus had become important to him, that when people asked Jesus, he had important things to say about life and about future.**

**If Jesus returned today? This question remains open, and I don’t know how we, how I would deal with this experience. If he came for real, then we would need to see how we would respond. Until then I don’t want to worry about that, for he has come and he comes again and again. I experience him, I feel his closeness, and he is present with his Spirit of Grace and with his blessing. He is present among us- we can’t see him, and not fully understand this reality, and yet we can experience it once and again. Until Jesus will return, I will be content with this presence of his Spirit.**

**Amen.**

**And the**