

**“A Safekeeping Song”**  
Sermon preached at Church on the Hill  
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It might be the most familiar verse in scripture, for followers of Jesus Christ: John 3:16. “For God so loved the world [as to give the] only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

In every language, it is the very best of the good news. «Tanto amó Dios al mundo, que no dudó en entregarle a su Hijo único, para que todo el que crea en él no perezca, sino tenga vida eterna.»

You hear it in songs, you see it on bumper stickers and in banners and posterboard at sports matches: John 3:16. You see it and remember: God loves. God gave Jesus. God forgives. God abides, eternally.

“It’s so simple,” said the son of an elderly woman who had died. “Jesus died for our sins. It’s all you have to know. Either you believe in him and get into heaven, or you don’t.” But the tone of his voice was slightly strained. As though he was also saying, Why didn’t everyone else comprehend what was so simple? You’re either in or out. Why did he have to explain to relatives who just didn’t get it?

But sometimes we need more from Jesus: a guidance that penetrates deeper.

What Jesus had for Nicodemus in that nighttime encounter carried him into a wholly, holy new realm of understanding. A beautiful new realm of understanding that was also dangerous, because of the way it would shake up his orderly life as a Pharisee, a scholar who knew the holy book forwards and backwards, knew the law better than the back of his hands.

## 2

It was nighttime. Nicodemus went to Jesus under the cover of darkness.

St John doesn’t tell why Nicodemus did so, but it’s likely that he knew he would get into trouble if anyone saw him. After all, Nicodemus was a religious leader: a teacher and practitioner of the religious law passed down from Moses to all the Jews. And most often in the Gospel of John we find the Pharisees and other religious authorities in fierce opposition to Jesus. So Nicodemus went alone, under cover of darkness. Instead of trying to challenge Jesus, he showed respect. “Rabbi — Teacher — we know you are from God. No one could do these things otherwise.”

Jesus replied in kind. “Very truly,” he said, as if to say: let’s go deeper still. Jesus acknowledged that Nicodemus had spoken truly by giving a still more advanced lesson: “no one can see God’s realm without being born from above.” The famous phrase that can also mean “born again.” Which is where Nicodemus got stuck.

“How can that happen? Can one reenter a mother’s womb?”

It could come across as a snarky question, a bit sarcastic. But I rather think Nicodemus was probing, respecting the teacher by challenging a statement he did not comprehend.

So Jesus explained: entering God's realm depends on a new understanding of where you are from: who made you, and why. Being born of water and Spirit was the metaphor Jesus used: a reference to the water and Spirit of baptism that signals entering into a new reality as beloved and committed to following God's Living Word.

We already know that Jesus was teaching that God's realm is for those who are alive now; he had made that promise just before this story. Earth and heaven are not sequential — after finishing up here, you go there — not at all. Earth and heaven are both here, right now. Both/and, instead of either/or. But entering God's realm, perceiving God's realm, means opening up your mind, opening up your spirit, opening up your heart to the bold, beautiful reality of God's realm, so elusive for us who are over-invested in the small reality of this world.

Really, I shouldn't be preaching something like this on a Sunday morning. This is the kind of conversation that belongs to two o'clock in the morning, when your defenses are down, when you're ready to receive and perceive the pathos of humanity and the presence of God's safeguarding power.

Last week I offered a thought about the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, the forty days and forty nights. In the deprivation and stress of his fasting, I imagine that Jesus had his own deep encounter with God's promises. Perhaps he sang the words of Psalm 121, a song of safekeeping. Perhaps he knew it by heart and prayed, repeating the words to himself. Let's try that ourselves: I will say a line of the psalm, and you repeat it, as a prayer. So put yourself in your prayer posture, breathe in a great breath of the spirit, and pray with me:

- <sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills.  
Where will my help come from?
- <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the Holy One,  
The Maker of heaven and earth.
- <sup>3</sup> God will not let your foot slip;  
The God who keeps watch over you will not slumber.
- <sup>4</sup> The God who keeps watch over the people will neither slumber nor sleep.
- <sup>5</sup> The Eternal One is your keeper;  
The Most High is your protection,  
close by,  
ready,  
at hand.
- <sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon disturb you by night.
- <sup>7</sup> The Almighty will keep you from all harm; God will keep safe your life.
- <sup>8</sup> The Holy One will keep watch over your going out and your coming in,  
Now and forevermore.

God's realm starts getting real when you and I have repeated the words enough that they lodge deep in our minds and our hearts. So that in the struggling times, in the deprivation times, as well as in the uplifted times, God's Living Word comes back to us.

### 3

Nicodemus went to Jesus at night to learn from him, because it was too dangerous to risk being seen during the day.

A few of us learned something new the other day — at least it was new to me. We were hearing about sanctuary congregations, which means communities of faith that are taking the risky step of offering shelter to sisters and brothers who are in fear of being deported. There's nothing simple, here: faith communities don't have any legal ground to protect someone from law enforcement. But churches and synagogues, mosques and gurdwaras do have moral ground to protect vulnerable people, even people whose names are on warrants, because the forces lined up against these vulnerable neighbors are so heavily politicized, so often arbitrary, so cruel, so morally wrong.

It seems that even immigration enforcement knows as much — because, we heard, they often do their raids in the dead of night, when fewer people may notice and raise objections. And the raids have begun. Raids that make the status of “illegal” the only salient fact about a person. Raids that are created by a massive power structure that has rejected the concept of forgiveness. Raids that ostensibly protect us, but the data on that score are sketchy at best. Mostly the raids are generating fear, instability, and increasing the notion that “they” are somehow different from, and less than, “us.”

Perhaps some of our sisters and brothers who are refugees, people for whom there is no safe place on the planet, are also praying Psalm 121, the safekeeping song. Like this:

- <sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills.  
Where will my help come from?
- <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the Holy One,  
The Maker of heaven and earth.
- <sup>3</sup> God will not let your foot slip;  
The God who keeps watch over you will not slumber.
- <sup>4</sup> The God who keeps watch over the people will neither slumber nor sleep.
- <sup>5</sup> The Eternal One is your keeper;  
The Most High is your protection,  
close by,  
ready,  
at hand.

Late at night, Jesus told Nicodemus, “Consider the wind.” Not the geological and meteorological forces that caused the air to move, but consider the wind that suddenly howls past the house then is gone. You cannot know where it started. You cannot know where it went. You can only know that it touched you, and you can make a good guess that it touched many others before and will touch many others after. Consider the wind, which is a little like the untamed Spirit of God, moving wildly, unpredictably. A wind that touches each creature and all of creation with the power of forgiveness, mercy, justice, compassion.

How can these things be? asked Nicodemus.

Jesus replied, just one person has transferred from heaven to earth: the Human One, the Messiah, the First Begotten of God. And that's so everyone can see it is possible. That the entry to heaven is right here on earth.

Maybe the entry to heaven will happen late tonight, when a family is huddled in fear of being sent back into the poverty and violence of the place they escaped — and a neighbor has been led by faith to stay with them, and say: “You are not alone. Whatever happens, you are not alone.”

Maybe together they will remember the truest reality, truer than the danger of nighttime raids: the reality of God's presence. Maybe they will repeat a prayer together like the safekeeping song:

<sup>4</sup> The God who keeps watch over the people will neither slumber nor sleep.

<sup>5</sup> The Eternal One is your keeper;  
The Most High is your protection,  
close by,  
ready,  
at hand.

#### 4

Jesus reminded Nicodemus of an old story. It happened while the Israelites were in the wilderness, that long, hard, costly journey between the enslavement of Egypt and the promised land of milk and honey. Out there in the desert, there was a time when the people became impatient. They disrespected their leader Moses. They spoke against God. The ancient storytellers told it this way: God sent poisonous snakes that killed people. But God also told Moses how to defeat the deadly animals: make an image of one; set it on a pole. Everyone who looked at it, lived.

Where was the true power? Not in the threat they could see at their feet, but in God's promise of healing. Where was the true power? Not with the Pharisee's legalism, but with the embodied love of God. Where was the true power? Not in the nighttime raids, but in the risky solidarity of neighbor standing with neighbor.

Believing is more than a matter of agreeing with your mind: it is praying with your presence.

Being born is more than a matter of passage from womb into world: it is remembering the miracle of the one who made you, the one who nurtured you, the one who fed you with the milk of your mother's breast. Being born was nothing you did; it was all the work of the God who formed you and loved you into being. Being born from above is nothing you and I do, either — except trusting in the birthing God as much as we trusted our mother and midwife on the day we moved from darkness into the light.

God loved us so much that God repeated the miracle of birth. God loves us so much that God is sending us to each other still — under cover of night, or in the piercing light of day — to bring another birth of love that conquers fear.

**5**

And in case this is the first sermon you have ever heard, and in case this is the last sermon you will ever hear, let me say it plain and clear:

God's love for the world comes to you and me in this way: daring to trust that God has opened up a passageway between earth and heaven that will never again be closed. We call that passageway, Jesus Christ, Human One, Anointed, One, Messiah.

God's realm is yours, in your hushed nighttime conversations.

God's realm is yours right now, in the bright light of day.

God's realm is yours in the moment that you find someone vulnerable, and pray together and remember: As long as God gives me breath, you are not alone.

As long as God gives wind, you are not alone.

As long as Christ puts us together, we are not alone. And the place where Christ puts tyou together is heaven, for sure.