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John 3: 1-17

HAS JESUS EVER BAFFLED YOU?

Happy Anniversary Christ our Anchor Friends! Forty Years! Wow!

Christ our Anchor was born back when a gallon of gas was \$.91, an average monthly rent was \$320.00, the average price of a car was \$7,983 and a bag of cheese puffs was \$.89

I was intrigued **and** inspired when I learned of the scripture chosen for the Anniversary Year celebration from Deuteronomy 8:2.

“Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these 40 years in the wilderness in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.”

Did you realize that on January 24, 1982, you were asked....no, commissioned to enter a wilderness?

I was at that chartering worship service, and I don't remember seeing a lot of hiking books, back packs and camping equipment and rain gear; people prepared to enter a wilderness.

I do remember seeing some very courageous people who left well-established, financially stable churches to begin this ministry on the Broadneck Peninsula. Perhaps I should have packed up some gumboots and sunscreen that day and given those as gifts for traversing the deep waters or the desert sun. We all like a little bit of controlled wilderness; a nice hike on an autumn day, jumping the rocks along a stream. But that's not the wilderness of Deuteronomy 8:2. Those Israelites traversed both a literal and a spiritual wilderness for 40 years. As have you!

That day back in January 1982, people heard the words, “By the grace of God, the Presbytery of Baltimore now proceeds to charter the congregation of Christ our Anchor Presbyterian Church with joy and thanksgiving”

People had a vision, a hope, trust. What they didn't have was **certainty**, a guarantee, and that is the real beauty and essence of that day 40 years ago. Because this whole thing called Christ our Anchor might not have worked.

How many waited? I could have been one of those who said, “Well, my kids have a great youth group. I love the music program at my church. My friends are here. I am just going to wait a year or two and see how that new Broadneck church works out.”

Thank the Lord for those who stepped into the wilderness.

But let's not be too critical of those who hung back (especially because I was probably one of them) because if we are honest, we all like **certainty!!!** We want a plan, to know what we are getting into, to understand what's ahead.

That's why we need to make friends with Nicodemus this morning.

Nicodemus was a knowledgeable and respected Pharisee. Obviously there had been talk among the Pharisees about what Jesus was doing. Nicodemus called them "signs" and the conclusion among the religious leaders was that Jesus had to come from God in order to do what he was doing.

Nicodemus didn't really show interest in getting to know Jesus. He was far more interested in understanding how Jesus did what he did.

Jesus gives an answer and frankly, it is somewhat baffling and befuddling.

"You can't see the kingdom of God without being born from above."
"No one can enter the kingdom without being born of water and the Spirit."

I am not sure if you have noticed, but this is the third week in a row now that we are getting these kinds of answers from Jesus. Especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus seems to be incapable of giving a straight, clear answer. It's baffling! Has Jesus ever baffled you?

The two most common "take aways" from this story of Jesus' clandestine meeting with Nicodemus is:

1. John 3: 16: For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have every lasting life. Understandable!

The second most common "take away"

2. Is the concept which comes from the phrase "born anew," which has come to be coined "born again." I want to address this for a minute.

People will give very personal testimony about being "born again" and the deep religious experience that was for them. Some may even ask, "Have you been born again?" I want to listen to those stories, affirm them and rejoice in the ways these people have experienced Jesus.

We need to also listen to the biblical scholar, Gail O'Day, who points out that very often these testimonies privilege us over Christ. The attention often becomes so focused on one's personal

story told repeatedly. And it's easy for the source of that life change which is Jesus, to get moved to the sidelines.

There's great passion about being "born again." People want that experience, that feeling, and the certainty that goes along with it.

The Holy Spirit does indeed wrap us in the grace of God and the love of Christ, reminds us that God knew us even as we were knit together in our mother's womb.

But always predictable.... guaranteeing that we will always feel the exhilaration of "born again" or be always completely secure in all our beliefs?

That is not the conversation Jesus was having with Nicodemus that night.

The Greek word that often gets translated as "born again" actually means "born from above" or "born anew" (over and over again). There's no English word that's its equivalent and captures the essence of what Jesus was saying.

The Spirit of the living Lord is unpredictable and blows where it will blow, continuously revealing itself in new, often surprising, and sometimes challenging ways that will, at times, shake, rattle and roll our certainties and lead us into a new way of living and being.

It can be difficult to open the window and let that breeze of the Spirit in, particularly if we have our life tidied, sorted and labeled into neat little piles. Something is going to get messed up by that breeze.

We can be very much like Nicodemus.
In her commentary, Sandra Schneider writes

We are meant to identify with Nicodemus. We, like Nicodemus are religious people who tend to be overconfident in our faith based religious knowledge. Like Nikodemus, we can become confined by the established beliefs, by certainty and then we are not prepared to hear what is really new in the revelation of Jesus. Nicodemus is not a figure of the past. He lives in the heart of every believer who is tempted to settle down in the secure religious wisdom of the establishment and therefore resist the challenges and joys of ongoing revelation and a God who is always doing something new.

Believers often expect that in a world of danger, uncertainty, and despair that faith ought to function as the one thing that is certain, completely immune to doubt, disappointment and change. Well, friends, read the Bible. Even Jesus had times of doubt, disappointment and uncertainty.

In her book "Wholehearted Faith" Rachel Held Evans writes

“Perhaps faith is best held with an open hand, nurtured by boundaries but also holy exploration, nurtured by tradition but also innovation. Faith is not at odds with questioning. We can be doubtful but still rest in the tender embrace of God’s steadfast love, a God who not threatened by our times of inconsistency. We can ask bold questions knowing that God loves us unconditionally, not in spite of these questions but because we are willing to ask them.”

We are willing to be baffled and befuddled at times, to step into the wilderness, to accept that the opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is being too sure of ourselves.

Thomas Merton said, “If I find God too easily, maybe I haven’t found God. If I find God only in the places where I want to find God, have I really found God?” Have I shut the window to that breeze of the Holy Spirit and put God in one of my tidy, labeled, well sorted piles?”

Again, Rachel Held Evans writes, “Maybe the wilderness can be at once a place of refuge and a space of disquietude. It can be both where you sigh in relief and feel your heart pounding out of your chest as you approach the unknown. Jesus sought solitude in the wilderness for prayer, but it was also where he was tempted. The wilderness can bring clear constellation night skies and the gentle reassuring murmur of a stream, but there is also the unseen viper and the disappointment of brambles without berries.”

Maybe the call of the wilderness is to ask us to think more deeply, more broadly, more adventurously, more boldly about all the “maybes,” the possibilities with a God who can really at times baffle us, but who we trust holds the future.

Christ Our Anchor, I just have this feeling that you have another 40 years ahead of you, probably more. Will you sit back in your easy chair as the well-established PCUSA church on the Broadneck peninsula?

Or should we bring some gumboots, hiking shoes and camping gear to that June 5 celebration so you can step once again step into the wilderness of the next 40 years?

After the Israelites had survived their long forty-year journey through the wilderness, they were reminded that it was the place “where they saw how the Lord their God had carried them.”

The Reverend John Buchanan was remembering a Sunday service where he baptized a two-year-old boy. After the baptism, Pastor John put his hand on the boy’s head, looked right at him and said, “You are a child of God, baptized with water and sealed by the Spirit. You belong to Jesus forever. You are stepping into new life with God.”

Unexpectedly the little boy looked at Pastor John and in a very loud voice said,

“Uh-oh!”

The congregation thought it was a very amusing moment. I think it's one of the best and most honest liturgical responses I have ever heard.

So, forty years ago, a group of people stepped into the wilderness and gave birth to the life and ministry of Christ our Anchor. God celebrates this anniversary and rejoices with you.

But the Holy Spirit doesn't stop there. You are not done.

For God is calling you to step into the next 40 years.

Uh-Oh!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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