

“like a child”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 3, 2012

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 6: 1-8 John 3: 1-17

Isaiah 6: 1-8

A Vision of God in the Temple

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

John 3: 1-17

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³ Jesus answered him, “**Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.**” ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “**Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.** ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “**Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?**

¹¹ “**Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.** ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “**For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.**

¹⁷ “**Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.**

Sermon

*(I am deeply indebted to the Rev. Don C. Brewer, my beloved
Father-in-Love*

for his exegetical and theological insights which helped to

*inspire this message. Portions of his teachings are included,
and we are grateful.)*

a touch of wonder

Love never gets old.

Joy is always a welcome guest.

Hope springs eternal.

Receive and give away the love, joy, and hope that is found in Jesus Christ.

Do so with a touch of wonder.

Keep alive your child-like qualities of wonder, of awe, of trust.

When we are very, very young,

even before memories are stored,

even before we are born,

the Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit plant deep within us

the gifts of compassion, service above self,

charity, hope, gratitude, and so much more.

And each time we tap into these overflowing, never-ceasing gifts of the Trinity,

we share a touch of wonder with another soul,
and the world is never, ever the same.

A touch of wonder has spiritual power.

“Jesus asks of us to live into a fresh sense of wonder,

a curiosity which is never satiated,

an expectation that discovery will go on and on and beyond

what we expect.” (Don Brewer)

Let it out and let it in,

and see the difference it makes;

see a life transformed,

a community renewed,

nations reconciled.

Live into a fresh sense of wonder,

and angels in celebration join in with the Lord of the Dance.

a touch of wonder

The Rev. Dr. Derrick Harkins currently serves as pastor and servant leader

to folks from all walks of life,

including homemakers and the homeless,

teachers, students, providers of care and
compassion,

and the President of the United States and
the First Family.

He pastors at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.,

where cross the crowded ways of life,

preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ

to the principalities and powers and whole
people of God.

My wife Betty and I remember well

when the three of us were fresh-faced, first-year students

at Union Theological Seminary in NYC.

Tall, handsome and dashing,

still green behind the ears, a recent graduate of Boston
University,

Derrick Harkins was asked to preach at a Good Friday
service.

Afterward, while relaxing in the dormitory,

he told a group of us the story of that Lenten evening.

He said he was asked to preach

the seventh of seven sermons from seven ministers;

each preacher was assigned one of Jesus' seven last

words.

By the time young Derrick got up to speak

the congregation had already heard the Word six times,

and each sermon was delivered

from well-respected and accomplished
preachers.

Derrick wondered inside whether the congregation,

who by this point in the service was well-sated with good
preaching,

would, upon seeing his youthful presence,

hear or even heed the Word he had been given
to deliver.

Rev. Harkins looked folks in the eyes and said

(and here I paraphrase a statement heard 27 years ago!),

“Good evening.

As you can well see, I am the youngest preacher here,

*and my fellow speakers’ wisdom and experience far exceeds
my own.*

I am just now starting my seminary training

while my esteemed colleagues

have years of pastoral leadership in their wake.

I know I do not know as much as my elders.

But there is one thing I do know:

‘In the year that King Uzziah died,

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty;

and the hem of his robe filled the temple...”

Derrick told us that when the church heard him speak of his call to preach,

a call he likened to that of the Prophet Isaiah,

the congregation clapped and shouted for him to bring them the Word.

As I listened to Derrick retell his experience,

the hairs on the back of my neck stood up,

and a shiver went down my spine.

Still does, still does.

Is there anything more powerful and wonder-full

than hearing someone's call, their personal testimony,

their reminding you and themselves

that one day *“I heard the voice of the Lord saying,*

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

a touch of wonder

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts!

The whole earth is full of God's glory!

The holiness of God is in you

and shines through you so brightly

we can see Christ shining through you!

My friends, when your love reminds people of God,

they experience the holy.

When you practice, show and testify

that you have a call from Christ

to serve, to love, to be and share the Good News,

to be present and accounted for in such a time
as this,

you make them – and me – shiver and hair to stand up.

(yes, that is the secret for my crazy hair.

Did I tell you about the time I went to an elementary school

stepping out in a three-piece suit and feeling quite spiffy

*when a First Grader asked, "Mister, is today crazy
hair day?")*

When your words and actions coalesce in communion with Christ

and to point to the core of your call from God to serve,

My Lord and My God, watch out!

hearts beat faster, hands can hold more,
backs grow stronger, tired bodies and souls
get renewed,
prayers become more fervent,
suddenly folks want to be better,
to live more faithfully
to love more fiercely,
and have the power to transform.

Go ahead, see what happens when you let in and let out a touch of
wonder.

Yet so often we do our damndest

to cover up our call from Christ,

cover up our Christ-like connections,

cover up our Christian consciousness

cover up our Christianity,

to hide it under a bushel, sweep it under the rug,

laugh it off or deny its cosmic power

to save and heal, to forgive and
redeem.

(Are you more upset that I said the word “damndest”

or that we cover up the gifts of the Spirit?)

a touch of wonder

Do you believe that God wonders at the marvel of you?

I love that song by Atlanta's own Curtis Mayfield.

The wonders of you. The marvel of you. Made in the image of God.

Is it conceivable that the One who made you,

who loves you and holds you ever so close,

might meet with you in private and remind you to reciprocate?

God loves to meet us in the heart of our struggle.

God already knows the questions, the doubts, the challenges,

and the faith that bubbles up from within.

God opens the doors and windows wide for us

to have a connection with the holy;

for us to have a continuous conversation with the Messiah;

for us to have the confidence, the faith that affirms

that God is alive and at work, day and night.

And how many of us have had a come-to-Jesus-meeting with our Creator,

and heard new talk, new ideas, new ways of seeing and being

that opened our eyes and changed our minds?

Jesus and Nicodemus reached out to one another.

Jesus the rabbi teacher sat with the student/teacher Nicodemus;

Jesus the wanderer encountered an established religious leader.

Jesus, who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end,
opened the mind and altered the life

of a most practical and grounded Nicodemus.

Jesus said to Nicodemus and He says to us today,

*“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God
without being born from above.”*

Nicodemus misunderstood the statement of faith, and took it literally,
saying,

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?

*Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb
and be born?”*

Jesus answered,

*“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God
without being born of water and Spirit.*

*What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the
Spirit is spirit.*

Rev. Don Brewer opened this passage for us with a fresh outlook.

Don points out that

Nicodemus says, in effect, to Jesus

“I sense the Rule of God in what you do!

These signs cannot be done without the presence of God.”

Jesus says to Nicodemus,

“No one can see the Kingdom of God

unless he or she is born anew from above.”

Jesus is quoted in other gospels as saying.

“Unless you change and become like children,

you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” –

Matthew 18:3

“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child

will never enter it.” –Mark 10:15

Nicodemus certainly understood the conversation to be saying,

“Become a child again”.

But he took it literally.

Can a man enter his mother’s womb again? Can a woman do this?

Nicodemus, was among the inner circle of Jewish leaders in Judea,
an accomplished scholar of sacred writings,
a respected mature man of great influence.

How could he start life over? Very puzzling!

He was admirable, eager to examine this Galilean Jew, Jesus.

In John 7:50,

Nicodemus protested the quick judgment of Jesus by his
colleagues.

“Our Law does not judge people
without first giving them a hearing
to find out what they are doing, does
it?”

And, of course, he accompanied Joseph of Arimathea

who went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

Nicodemus even brought a large amount of burial spices

and they laid him in a prominent tomb near the place of
crucifixion.

What else was Jesus asking of Nicodemus than a very large measure
of humility?

A touch of wonder...

Jesus asks of us to live into a fresh sense of wonder,
a curiosity which is never satiated,
an expectation that discovery will go on and on and
beyond
what we expect.

“Born again” is not a one-time experience
which sets us on the Christian Way as a beginning.
Being born again is a recurring refreshment of the Spirit of God
which opens curtains of dramas which occur often,
reminding us that the Spirit of God goes before us
to show us the Kingdom
with childlike eyes, ears, freshness and
enthusiasm,
with a sense of wonder that is renewed over and over
as life moves from ten to twenty and seventy and
eighty.

Evidence of God’s presence is revealed over and over
for those whose perceptions are open
with humility to learn anew the graciousness and
miracles
of God in every age and among unlikely
people.

Nicodemus' associates were to say,

“Scriptures speak of no prophet coming from Galilee!”

O, but did He ever!

And thanks to the power of the Holy Trinity

to call and connect and convert,

prophets and pastors,

faith priests and presidents and parishioners of

are bubbling up and out

of Decatur and DeKalb and
Dafar

and from wherever the Spirit of God alights and calls
us forth.

a touch of wonder

Like most young parents,

Martin Luther took great joy in his children.

One day when he was deeply upset by his church and political
adversaries,

Martin Luther watched as his son Martin nursed in his
mother's arms.

He remarked, "*Child, your enemies are the Pope, the Bishops,
Duke George, Ferdinand, and the devil.
And there you are...unconcerned.*"

As he observed his son's complete trust,
he realized his own anxiety was unwarranted.

God had promised to protect him, to love him, to be present, no matter what.

On another occasion,

Martin Luther came upon his 4 year old daughter Anasthasia.

Anasthasia was happily prattling away about Jesus Christ, angels and heaven.

Martin Luther said, "*My dear child, if only one could hold fast to this faith.*"

Anashtasia quickly replied, "*Why, Papa, don't you believe it?*"

Luther was shocked.

He later reflected on the exchange

and wrote, "*Christ has made the children our teachers.*"

Jesus asks of us to live into a fresh sense of wonder,
a curiosity which is never satiated,

an expectation that discovery will go on and on and
beyond

what we expect.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy
Spirit. Amen!*

Extra Material

-

Christians are comfortable with living the questions.

We are living the questions.

Nicodemus approached Jesus with questions.

Do you imagine that Jesus loved it....and him?

Jesus welcomes serious inquiry. He cares about folks who are
wrestling.

He appreciates, according to scripture, those who take their faith walk
seriously.

He invites into his circle

those who are seeking and exploring and deepening

their relationship with the holy and the human
condition.

Jesus listens to our prayers and wondering in the middle of the night,

and says, in effect, *“Let’s you and me get to the crux of the matter.”*

You know, my friends, some churches are answer churches.

They will tell you everything they think you should know.

Answer churches will give you quick solutions and easy answers

to life’s problems and concerns. Thinking is not required.

We seek to be a question church.

We will help each other to learn the questions we need to ask,

and we will walk this journey of faith whilst seeking God’s guidance.

Who is helping you to lift up questions and seek guidance?

Are you putting yourself in position to be a guide, a listener, a helper?

Christians are comfortable with the dance of faith and doubt.

The opposite of faith is not doubt; faith’s opposite is fear.

Doubt is beautiful.

Doubt is healing and helpful and a key part

of the spiritual process and practice of growth and changing.

Whenever faith is dampened or lessened or even shattered,

Christ meets us where we are in the day or the night,

and helps us to rebuild our faith anew, one tenet at a time.

We slowly, falteringly step away from the graveside,

leave the rumpled sheets and stand up,

raise the blinds to see a new dawn, to see that the
night has ended,

and we are empowered to build a new faith

by picking up a memory here, cherishing a smile over there,

humming again a favorite verse of a hymn, lifting up a
scripture,

sinking into the embrace of a friend,

laughing where once we wept, sharing when we used
to hold back,

beholding God again while being held by
God's own.

And so we grow and change with a soul renewed,

born again and again and again, from above, with love.