

**Suffering and Salvation in African-American Spirituals (II):  
Somebody's Knocking on Your Door  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
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Text: John 3:1-17**

The great historian and social commentator W.E.B. DuBois assessed the impact of African-American spirituals in his landmark book *Souls of Black Folks* this way: "And so by fateful chance the Negro folk song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas . . . it remains the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of [African-American] people." While DuBois referred to spirituals as "sorrow songs" because of their expression of yearning for a truer world, he also understood that through all their sorrow "there breathes a hope, a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence." [quoted by Maurice Jackson in liner notes from *Steal Away: Spirituals, Hymns and Folk Songs*, 1995]

--echoes of the peace that passes human understanding.  
I simply can't shake the striking parallels between these spirituals and the journey the Christian Church undertakes during the season of Lent. We are called to remember events of sorrow: rejection, betrayal, a violent death, and to find in them a reason to hope that God's truth prevails, justice will triumph, and love conquers all. Last week we walked the lonesome valley and discovered our Divine Friend who walks with us. The journey of Lent is a freedom march. But we are not yet to the Promised Land. The human family everywhere is in captivity to various "Pharaohs:" from oppressive systems and concentrated poverty, to greed and materialism. Rich and poor, powerful and powerless have at least this much in common: we are slaves, spiritually speaking. We need the truth that will make us free.

This Lenten sermon series aims to explore the ways in which we are enslaved, and to revive hope that where the Spirit of God is, there is freedom. I wanted to ground that spiritual journey within the particular context of the African-American struggle so as not to speak abstractly about a reality that is both spiritual and material. The freedom we seek is not predicated upon removal from this earthly realm, but imbues this life with joy and purpose as surely as it does the next. The church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will find its relevance and vitality as a multi-racial, multi-cultural community of men and women, youth and children, listening to one

another, learning from one another. Consider this one attempt toward church growth!

The morning gospel text describes an encounter between Jesus and a man seeking freedom; in this case, freedom from a world closed off from miracles, bounded by rules, capable of being little more than “the same old, same old.” A man named Nicodemus came to see Jesus by night. It may have begun with a knock on the door. But as the story unfolds, see if you can tell: who is knocking at the door? Listen for God’s Word in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the third chapter at the first verse; it’s found on page \_\_\_\_\_ of the chapel/pew Bibles if you care to follow along with me: [JOHN 3:1-17]

You might say that Nicodemus is the brother of people who sit in the back rows at church. Really! Church research (who thinks up studies like these?!) cites location in the sanctuary or worship space as one indicator of engagement. Those who sit in the front third tend to be those who are “on board” with the church; involved in and supportive of its ministries. They are folks who are comfortable being “down front”—close to the pulpit and the preacher’s watchful eye. But the people who sit in the back? I know there are exceptions!— they tend to be those who are just not too sure, those who are still at some distance from active duty. They tend to be people with questions, who are not certain of their faith, who are looking for.....something.

Congratulations--you’ve got a friend in Nicodemus! He came at night to see Jesus; under cover of darkness to avoid the raised eyebrows or judgmental stares. He came at night, though he might easily have approached Jesus in the daylight, in the public places from which Jesus spoke. He came loaded with questions, and one senses, with a hunger to know the meaning of life, or at least the something he was missing. You can hear wistfulness in his response to Jesus’ bold affirmation of being born again: *How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?*

Jesus’ responses suggest that Nicodemus was limited by his own tentativeness, perhaps his need for control that made it hard for him to go with the flow of the Spirit’s breath. I picture Nicodemus as a practical man, not drawn to the touchy-feely, supernatural side of spirituality. He doesn’t easily grasp the metaphors Jesus uses of wind and breath and spirit (the Greek words are interchangeable). It’s hard for him to see potential for freedom in his soul, bound as he is by religious teaching that reduces complex reality to rules and faith to a formula. One size fits all.

And Jesus doesn't meet a formula with a formula. *You hear the sound of the wind, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.* Let go, Nicodemus, and let God. You have no idea the potential God has placed within you. Let it unfold; don't try to capture or control it.

Presbyterian pastor and author of best-selling books Frederick Buechner recalls a low time in his life when the Spirit broke through to him in an unusual way. "I remember sitting parked by the roadside once," Buechner writes, "terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter's [anorexia] and what was going on in our family." As he was sitting there lost in worried thought, he noticed a car that seemed to come from nowhere. His message from God, the word he most needed to see at that moment, was found on its license plate: TRUST. Buechner describes the difficulty of putting such an experience into words. "Was it something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while? Or was it, the word of God? Speaking of this incident awhile afterwards, the owner of the car came forward and identified himself as the trust officer of a local bank. Eventually he presented Buechner with the license plate which bore the word he so desperately needed to see that day: TRUST. Buechner placed the license plate on a bookshelf where he could be reminded daily to trust God. "It is rusty around the edges and a little battered, and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen." [*Frederick Buechner's The Sacred Journey, Harper and Row, 1982*]

So okay, we won't all see skywriting, or be handed a divine message via automobile vanity license plate. But the wind of the Spirit is blowing, revealing a life that is not simply "more" but "new." And we are invited to trust in the God who makes all things new; who transforms potential into reality; who breaks whatever chains prevent us from experiencing abundant life, beginning here and now. Faith, as Fredrick Buechner concluded, is the direction your feet take you when you discover that God loves you. Somebody's knocking at your door. Will you get on your feet and come answer?

There's something incomplete about the gospel's account of Nicodemus' late-night conversation with Jesus. We don't know what its outcome was; we can only surmise. Nicodemus shows up in the gospel two more times: once, shortly after the night visit, Nicodemus defends Jesus in front of his priestly colleagues; and then, at the last, after Jesus has been crucified, here comes Nicodemus, bringing a mixture of spices, about a hundred pounds' weight—extravagantly far more than was needed for anointing the body. That's all we know for sure. But I wonder if the gospel account itself didn't come from Nicodemus himself: recounted by him after the fact.

Perhaps not so curiously, the eventual editors of John chose this place to proclaim the heart of Christian faith, a God whose love knows no bounds, no limits, a love that is as wide as earth itself, yet infinitely personal. For God so loved...Nicodemus, you, me, the world that includes slaves and oppressors, klansmen and lynch mobs and victims of their hate. For God so loved the world that he sent the Son to save them all. In some ways it is hard to express it that way: justice demands some retribution, some righting of wrongs. Human societies must promote liberty through law. But God's dream is bigger than any nation, no matter how just. In Jesus Christ, God got global: envisioning the whole world set free from sin, from hatred, from death.

It's enough to make you move up two or three rows! It's enough to make the front rows the hot seats of questing and questioning. Somebody's knocking at your door. The spiritual is based on a text from Revelation, in which Christ invites: *Behold I stand at the door and knock; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me.*" The invitation is personal. The sense of urgency is palpable: your freedom depends upon your response. Enough of languishing in neutrality; of being half-out the door before the last amen. Jesus wants to set you free. Will you answer?

TO JESUS CHRIST, WHO LOVES US AND FREED US FROM OUR SINS, AND MADE US TO BE A KINGDOM, TO JESUS CHRIST BE GLORY AND POWER FOREVER AND EVER! AMEN.

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