

Sermon: In the Heat of the Night

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17**

A month ago, I had nothing particular in mind when I chose to call this sermon ‘In the Heat of the Night.’ Sidney Poitier portraying Detective Virgil Tibbs in the 1967 film of the same name had nothing to do with it. It was probably the image of the live coal touching Isaiah’s lips combined with Nicodemus’ visit to Jesus plus an impending deadline that made me do it. Today, I’m not sure what it means.

Anyway, in our first hymn this morning, we sang, ‘Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty,’ whose lyrics delve into the idea of the Trinity. Christians only developed the Trinity doctrine after the Resurrection when they began trying to explain who they understood God to be.

God is One, yet God is made known to us in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, according to Scripture. And though they are all at work in the world, it is still the work of the One God. It’s too easy to say that the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery, but it is one of the most difficult things to explain, so that’s as far as we’ll go today.

We read this passage from Isaiah on what we call Trinity Sunday because the early church focused on it as it began developing the doctrine.

The Lord said, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go out for *us*?’ It’s natural to ask, ‘Who is ‘us’?’ In Genesis 1, God said, ‘Let us make humankind in *our* image.’ In Proverbs 8, Lady Wisdom tell us that God was speaking to her. In the first words in his Gospel, John implies that God was speaking to Jesus, and the apostle Paul thought the voice speaking to Isaiah was the Holy Spirit, in Acts 28:25. Most Old Testament scholars feel that in the Isaiah passage, God was speaking to his heavenly council, as he was in the Book of Job, and that is probably how we should see it too.

In fact, the passage doesn’t prove anything about the Trinity, but it does show us God’s revelation in calling Isaiah. It also shows us something about the ongoing story of salvation in the Bible.

Before we get to Nicodemus, we should talk about what it might mean to say, ‘Holy is the Lord of hosts.’ What does it mean to say that God – of all people – is ‘holy?’

It’s nothing new to Isaiah. He speaks of God as the ‘Holy One of Israel’ 26 times in his book. To be ‘holy’ means to be consecrated, devoted, or prepared, and there are three places in the Bible where ‘holy’ is more than just a word.

In Exodus 3, when Moses approached God at the burning bush, the ground God calls holy includes the precise place where Moses stands, not just the bush out of which Yahweh speaks. In this case, the entire mountain was holy ground devoted to the meeting of God and man.

In the second instance, in Exodus 19, Moses is now the middle man who consecrates the *people* – the whole nation – to get them ready to meet God. They can only go up the mountain so far, just a little way, but they have to be prepared in advance.

Finally, we have this passage in Isaiah. God comes to meet Isaiah in the front room of the Temple, in that space between the divine and the mundane where regular people are permitted to go. Notice that Isaiah was flat on the ground so that he could see only the edges or hem of God’s robe.

Looking at all three instances, we have holy ground, a holy nation, and a holy God, who happens to be devoted to the human project. We might ask, are humans as devoted as God is to work for their own salvation?

Which brings us to Nicodemus.

In going to Jesus by night, the physical darkness becomes a metaphor for Nicodemus’ spiritual darkness. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin that eventually arrests Jesus. Though he represents religious authority, he seems open to Jesus and his teachings, almost like an ally; an admirer more than a follower. He lets Jesus know that the Sanhedrin acknowledge him as ‘a teacher who has come from God.’

Nicodemus appears in John’s Gospel three times: here; in chapter 7 where he argues that Jesus hasn’t had a fair trial (7:50-51); and in chapter 19 at the tomb (19:39).

But he has a problem. While he is a Pharisee, trained and learned in the Law, he doesn’t seem to understand what it means to be ‘born from above,’ which puzzles Jesus. How could you not know this, Nicodemus? But Nicodemus knows there’s a lot he doesn’t know, so he comes to Jesus by night to get schooled.

In return, Jesus challenges Nicodemus to reconsider the Pharisees interpretation of the Law and of the world. And Nicodemus knows that Jesus comes *from* God to declare what he knows *about* God. He suspects that the Pharisees might have it wrong.

We can choose to believe or not believe what Jesus teaches us. He tells us about earthly things in parables, those subversive stories sprinkled with secret code words that only those with ears can hear.

It's our choice to live 'according to the flesh' or to live by the Spirit. To live according to the flesh means to conduct our lives in a self-centered, self-serving manner. Such a life ignores the reality of the Holy Spirit at work. When people say they are spiritual but not religious, they're talking about finding their own experience of God, which isn't a bad thing. But Paul understands spirituality to mean the Holy Spirit is active in our lives. His focus is on living life in God's family, and not out on our own.

In John, verse 8 stands out: "The wind blows where it chooses; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." It made sense then and it makes sense now to compare the Spirit of God to the wind. The Hebrew word *ruach* can mean three things: the breath of life, as in Genesis 2; it can mean the desert wind; and it can mean the Holy Spirit, described by the Bible scholar John Johnson as 'a supernatural power that sweeps across history and takes possession' of our lives.

The Spirit 'acts without ceasing.' The Spirit is always at work, even during those times when we think that maybe God has left us on our own, and that's because the Spirit is God's agent here on earth, that part of God that works in us, and through us, and around us.

It's impossible for us to dictate which direction the Spirit should take, or when. It's not up to us, nor are there any limits where and for whom the Spirit will act. God can touch us all no matter how greatly we have sinned or turned away from God. And when the wind blows, it makes its presence felt. When it stirs you up, you know. Maybe that's what brought Nicodemus to see Jesus in the middle of the night – perhaps the Spirit *drove* him and suddenly, he could no longer sleep.

We can't tell today what God will make of us or of our lives – I'm guessing Nicodemus had no idea that someday he might be one of those to claim Jesus' body after the crucifixion and help prepare it for burial. That he did is the sign of a changed man.

We're a culture that likes to think we're in control, that we can benefit from that control, and that somehow, the more restrictions and regulations we devise, the safer we will be. The Holy Spirit is dangerous in one sense because we can't control it. We tend to trust only the things we can see and evaluate from our own experience. We forget that God is always with us. Like Nicodemus, we ask, 'How can these things be?' even when we suspect that the heavenly things exist, or when we have evidence of God having acted in our lives. The Spirit is also dangerous because once it takes hold, it will never let go.

Tuesday marked the 162nd anniversary of the caning of Charles Sumner, an abolitionist and King's Chapel member who was attacked on the floor of the U.S. Senate after speaking out against slavery. Meanwhile, on Boston Common today, we see the memorial flags commemorating those who have died in military service, reminding us of the high cost of answering the call to serve. How do we respond to a difficult commission, or speak distressing truths? What might our faith require us to speak or act against today? Does Isaiah know what God is asking of him? Does he know where God might send him? Maybe not, but he raises his hand and responds to the call to serve the Lord of hosts anyway.

But what about God's silence? Not everyone experiences God the way Isaiah did, or Abraham, or even Jacob, who wrestled with an angel who turned out to be ... God. Most of us haven't heard the locomotive sound of the Holy Spirit rushing in either. We often forget but can take comfort knowing that God dwells in silence. Then again, Isaiah, Abraham, and Jacob didn't have the distractions of talk radio, leaf blowers, and politicians on the campaign trail.

Maybe if we quiet down our own lives, God will draw near. If we can do that, we might find that God will become known to us in the most ordinary things, like a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. As Jesus said, 'If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?' None are *excluded* – 'for God so loved the *world*' – and none are *included* save those who are led by the Spirit of God, who allow themselves to be guided.

Amen.