

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 29

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

## Sermon May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021

### *Jesus Comes to Redeem Our World*

Nicodemus has seen some of the things Jesus has been doing, and is curious to learn more about this new reality. So, Nicodemus, a well-respected Pharisee, sneaks off after dark to see Jesus. Probably to avoid scrutiny from his colleagues and neighbors.

When Nicodemus arrives, he asks Jesus questions about this new reality he has witnessed. Jesus tries to answer them, but for Nicodemus, what Jesus says makes no sense to him. Nicodemus' curiosity turns into utter confusion.

Now if Nicodemus gets to a point where he can grasp this new reality Jesus is talking about, then will he be able to walk towards this new reality? Or will he retreat to what he knows? What is comfortable and safe for him?

As we see in John's gospel, Nicodemus will continue to wrestle with these questions as he witnesses all that Jesus says and does to initiate this new reality in our world.

Since the 1970s the church has started to witness a new reality. A church once filled to the brim with new immigrants from Europe (**Image**). A church that was once the center of the community. A church that was once major partners in the political discourse of this country. A church that seemed to be an important part of most people's lives. Was no more.

Immigrants started coming from countries where the main religion wasn't Christianity (**Image**). People in the church started to disengage for many different reasons leading to a steady decline in membership across all denominations. The church lost its central role in the community as other social organizations took precedence in people's lives. The church had less influence in political discourse as more diverse voices emerged across the country.

People who had grown up in the 1950's church no longer could recognize the church they were a part of.

So, we started all these visioning exercises to see if we could reengage people. In the 80s and most of the 90s we focused on reconnecting with the lost sheep of our congregations. In the late 90s and early 2000s we started to talk about evangelism, and reaching out to our neighbors. In the last decade we talked about restructuring our institutions with the hope that it would change our focus (**Image**).

We have spent the last fifty years trying to understand this new reality that we are standing in the presence of. Like Nicodemus, we are curious of what this new reality has to offer, but we are also confused.

Now if we get to a point where we can finally grasp this new reality that God has put before us, will we then walk towards this new reality or will we retreat to what we know? Will we retreat to what is comfortable and safe?

I remember after seminary when I was looking at different congregational profiles, I saw one congregation say they were looking for a pastor who could get young people to see how important the congregation's traditions were. Instead, of changing to meet the needs of a new generation they wanted the new generation to become like them. Preserving the old reality.

We have spent the last fifty years trying to figure out this new reality, but at the same time, we have had a lot of trouble letting go of the old realities. We are more comfortable standing in what we know than what we don't know. And as Nicodemus finds out, when we walk towards the new reality we are walking into the unknown. It is scary and unsettling.

I'm not surprised that through most of our revisioning we come back to what we know versus listening to what God is saying to us in this new reality.

Well, in 2020 the pandemic hit, throwing us all off course. Suddenly all the places, rituals and practices that we found comfort in over the decades were not accessible in the ways we once knew (**Image**). Our new reality went from a reality we were patiently trying to figure out to a reality that we needed to jump into.

Church became more fluid as we were unable to gather in our buildings for worship and bible studies. Churches finally took advantage of the online platforms that have been whispering invites into our ears for a couple of decades now. Giving the church a louder redeeming voice in a world where people were trying to make sense of all the chaos.

Churches have needed to think outside the box to continue their ministries. From Zoom to YouTube to Facebook to Drive Ins' to outdoor get togethers to curbside drop offs and pick ups for food and clothing ministries (**Image**). The church could no longer rely so heavily on its physical structure. The church was identifying more and more as the body.

And so, we, the church, could no longer ignore this new reality. The question as we start to see the end of this pandemic is: do we continue to walk towards this new reality and embrace everything that this new reality has to offer or do we retreat to what was?

Do we decide to go back to the way things used to be forgetting all we have explored, tried, and learned during this pandemic time?

As much as the pandemic has hurt us, I think for the church, the pandemic has challenged us to step outside the comforts of our walls, to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. From this pandemic, we, the church, have pushed ourselves to be more creative in revealing Christ's love to our neighbors. From this pandemic, our voice has found platforms where our healing and redemptive messages are being heard in the wider community (**Image**). From this pandemic, our communities have found new and creative ways to gather. From this pandemic, we have started to take bigger steps towards this new reality.

As we continue to walk towards this new reality we are redirected to Jesus' words to Nicodemus. Words of promise and hope. Jesus has come into the world to redeem it. Yes, Nicodemus is confused, and challenged to step into this new reality, but Jesus isn't here to condemn Nicodemus or you or I. Jesus is here to redeem us through this new reality.

All we need to do is put one foot in front of the other...

Let us pray, gracious God, we have struggled to understand this new reality that you have invited us to be a part of. We are anxious and scared. Grieving what was. Wondering what this new reality will look like, and how it will change us. As we come out of this pandemic, please give us the courage and the hope to continue walking towards this new reality. Trusting in your promise that in this new reality we will witness your redeeming love. **Amen.**

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