

The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 1, 2025 – Table Copy

SILENT PREPARATION

God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.

– John 3:17, *The Message*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)

Loving God, let the winds of the Spirit blow in our midst today. Let us both hear the sound, and feel the power. We need courage to face the challenges and struggles of life. We seek reassurance that you will be with us – in our going out, and in our coming in. Open our hearts in new ways to the promise of your healing grace, so that we may be a blessing to one another, and to your world. And, strengthen our faith to withstand the trials and temptations that can lead us away from a faithful journey with Christ. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Come Holy Spirit, who hovered over the chaos –
and brought forth the order of Creation,
and who gave birth to the Church – in the power of Pentecost:
Speak to us now through the Word you have inspired;
bring new birth – and new order – to our lives in this hour.
And expand our vision beyond this time and place,
that we may be equipped to follow where Christ leads,
and serve with joy – wherever you may send us. Amen.

FIRST READING

Genesis 12:1-9

Our first reading comes from Genesis – the book of “beginnings.”

*In Chapter 11, the people have vainly attempted to build a great tower –
to “make a name for themselves.”*

*And God – then – confuses their language,
and scatters them over the face of the earth.*

A genealogy – leading up to Abram – follows.

*In this morning's reading, God calls Abram to begin a line of descendants –
through whom, all the families of earth will be blessed....*

Now the LORD said to Abram,

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house
to the land that I will show you.

“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you,
and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

"I will bless those who bless you,
and the one who curses you I will curse;
and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.
Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son, Lot,
and all the possessions that they had gathered,
and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran;
and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

When they had come to the land of Canaan,
Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem,
to the oak of Moreh.

At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said,

"To your offspring I will give this land."

So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.
From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel,
and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east;
and there he built an altar to the LORD,
and invoked the name of the LORD.

And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

SECOND READING

John 3:1-17

Our reading from John's Gospel is likely to be very familiar to most of us.

*And – for that reason – it is especially important to listen to it
as if hearing it for the first time:*

Quite often, there are nuances that we may have missed.

*As the reading begins, Jesus has begun his earthly ministry,
and his signs – and teaching – have now made him widely known....*

Now there was a Pharisee, named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

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."

Jesus answered him,

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

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?"

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.
Do not be astonished that I said to you,
'You must be born from above.'

"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."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus answered him,

"Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

"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.

"If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe,
how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

"No one has ascended into heaven –
except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"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.

"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."

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

SERMON

“The Distinctive Dynamic of Discipleship”

As was said before our **Gospel Reading**,
sometimes what we think is *most familiar* may also be the *most unknown*.

Take the case of one **Midwest family**.

The **matriarchs** of the family had passed along
a **time-honored recipe** for the traditional **Easter ham**.

And – along with the list of **spices**, and **herbs**, and **rubs**, and **glazes**,
cooking times, and **basting procedures** –
was the *absolutely-strict* instruction:
the **last three to four inches** of the **ham** must be *cut off* –
completely removed.

This **order** – of course – was an *integral part* of the **recipe** –
the **recipe** at their **great-grandmother** had passed down.

And – so – **Grandma** *continued the practice*, as did her **granddaughter**.

But – when the **great-granddaughter** was initiated into the **secret recipe** –
she dared to ask “Why?”

Why – that is – the **statutory amputation** of the *end* of that **holiday ham**?

Neither her **mother** – nor her **grandmother** – had an answer.

But – thankfully – **great-grandma** was *still around*.

And, she had a **perfectly logical** – *if unexpected* –
explanation for the recipe detail:

“My roasting pan was too short,” – great grandma declared:

*“I had to cut off the last few inches –
or the ham would not fit in the pan.”*

And so – although the **conditions** had *changed* –
the **ensuing generations of cooks**
all continued to follow the **same, old instructions** –
without knowing why.

They *all failed* to embrace the **new reality**:
There *were now* **bigger pans** for **bigger hams**.

The **fact** is that it is *easy to get comfortable*,
to *adopt a routine...*, to *get stuck* – as it were – in a **rut**.

Thinking “outside the box” – on the other hand –
requires flexing some **mental muscles**,
and *pushing past* the **limits** of **thoughts**, and **expectations** –
the *very ones* that we *find so familiar*, and *reassuring*.

In this morning’s **Gospel passage**,
we find the *familiar, faith-defining concept* –
at least for **Western Christianity** –
of being “**born again**.”

And **today** – after *two millennia* –
it is a **phrase** that is *so familiar* that it has *virtually become unknown*.

Back in the **first century** – to the **Pharisee Nicodemus** –
Jesus’ insistence that “*no one can see the kingdom of God* –
without being born from above”
sounded *utterly bizarre*.

The term **Jesus** used to describe this **required rebirth** was “*anōthen*,”
a **Greek word** that had *two, distinct, meanings*:

“*Anōthen*,” could be understood to mean “**again**” – for a *second time*.

Or, it could mean “*from above*.”

“Anōthen” – then – had both a **horizontal** (*this-world*),
and a **vertical** (*heavenly*) **connotation**.

For his part, **Nicodemus** *was flummoxed* by Jesus’ declaration.

He responded – *perhaps even sarcastically* –
*“How can anyone be born after having grown old?
Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb,
and be born?”*

At this point, we should note *what Nicodemus* was:
a learn-ed religious scholar...,
a **Pharisee**...,
a savvy leader in the **Jewish community**...,
and – most likely – a **member** of the ruling **Sanhedrin**....

And – so – there can be little doubt
that he was *completely familiar* with the dual meaning of *“anōthen.”*

After all, if our **car beeps at us** –
and *warns us* that a door is *“ajar”* –
we *do not* think that the **opening into our car**
has *suddenly turned into* a **glass container** with a lid.

We *all know* the **nuances** of our **native language**.

But **Nicodemus** simply *could not accept* any way of *entering into the kingdom* –
of *experiencing God’s presence* –
other than by adherence to the **Torah**.

And so – *by clinging* to the **literal** –
Nicodemus sought *security* – and *refuge* – in his old **belief system**.

After all, that **old system** *protected him* – that is, from a **threatening notion** –
that **God had sent a new presence into the world**;
a new presence – and a *new possibility* – **Jesus the Christ**.

And, not only that:

To the **left-brain, literal mind,**
the **metaphor** – of being “*born again*” – was *nonsensical*.

Perhaps so it is that one of the **hottest areas** of **religious research** today
is the **relationship** *between* **neuro-science** and **theology**.

The **modern mapping** of the *human brain's activities* –
by **neuro-science**, and **psycho-neuro-linguistics** –
has revealed that our **brains** have *learned to delegate*.

The **brain itself** has **bicameral hemispheres**,
divided by a **membranous cartilage** *known as* the “*corpus callosum*.”

Essentially, we have a “*left brain*,” and a “*right brain*.”

But this **division** *is not* a – “*what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas*” –
kind of separation.

Rather, there is always **intimate communication** – *between* the **two halves** –
through the **corpus callosum**.

But – *nevertheless* – these **two spheres** of the **brain**
each have their own strengths..... and weaknesses.

The “*left brain*” has the *home team advantage*
for **logical, rational, sequential thought processes**.

The “*right brain*” gives **intuitive, reactionary, environmental responses**
the upper hand.

And – *together* – these **dual strengths**
have given us astonishing advances in **science...**,
in the **beauty of art...**,
in structures for **politics, and power...**,
and in the **magic of music...**

So – with these *facts in mind* – our reading from **John Chapter 3**
reveals **Nicodemus** as the **patron saint of left-brained people**.

Nicodemus' *vigorously offensive, literal response to Jesus*
reveals *someone totally stuck in left-brain gear*.

And, when **Jesus** announces that **God** is *working in a new way* –
through the “*water*” of the **new birth**,
and through the “*winds*” of a **new Spirit** –
Nicodemus cannot get beyond the rational literalism
of his **left brain**.

Hence, he utters one of the *most uncomprehending responses* in all of the **Bible**:
“*How can this be?*
Must I enter my mother's womb a second time – and be born?”

But – while **Nicodemus is stuck in left-brain mode** –
Jesus talks in whole brain.

And – *in so doing* – he moves right to left,
starting with the right brain.

Notably – for its part – the **right brain** deals with
envisionings – instead of **equations**,
metaphors – instead of **mathematics**,
and *continuing stories* – instead of **concluding summations**.

And – so – the **whole brain** response to **Jesus' insistence** –
the **requirement** that we must be born “*anōthen*” –
is not “How is this possible?”

But – *rather* – “*What must I change to do this?*”

The **reality** is that *today* – **twenty centuries** later –
the **Church** has largely fallen back –
into the **original confusion** –
the confusion that **Nick-by-night showcased** with **Jesus**:

That is to say, *we know* what **Jesus** is saying.

We know that being born "**anōthen**"
requires a **whole new perspective** on **faith**, and **life**.

But – even as the **church** has claimed the "**born again**" label –
we are still – too often – stuck in **Nick-by-night** mode:

We still want to limit our **faith** – to *logic and rationality*,
to what we *think*,
and to what we can *intellectually comprehend*.

That – *in turn* – is why **churches** have more *by-laws* than *by-products*.

That is why we cling to **doctrines**, and **dogmas** –
instead of pursuing **promises**, and **possibilities**.

And *that is why* "**church**" *functions* as a **noun** – and *not* a **verb**.

So – *instead of pitting* our "**left**" **brains** against our "**right**" **brains** –
we – as the children of God's creation –
need to embrace our "**whole brains**."

But – knowing that the **Gospel** is "**Good News**" – *we have reason to take heart*:

Hope – for **right-brained people** – comes from the **fact**
that **Nicodemus** *eventually defended* **Jesus** –
as recorded in **John 7:50-51**.

And – *ultimately* – he *joined with* **Joseph of Arimathea** –
in claiming **Jesus' body** –
in providing the **Messiah** with a *respectable burial*.

Nicodemus *might not* have given up being a **Pharisee**,
but *he embraced* the **message** – and the **mission** – of **Jesus**.

And, *he risked* both **Jewish** and **Roman** ire –
 both by defending Jesus,
 and by *helping to claim* the **body** –
 the body of an **executed criminal** of the **Empire**.

In other words, **Nicodemus** finally *“let go”* –
 he *let go* of his **former worldview** –
 and of its **boundaries**, and **barriers**.

“Letting go” – then – *is not* just a **mantra** for **collegians** on **Spring Break**.

Rather, *“letting go”* is what **Christians** *need to embrace* –
 every day of their **lives**.

Instead of trusting in *“make-sense”* **reason** – and *“sensible”* **logic**,
 we need to *trust equally* in
 our sense of **awe...**,
 our sense of **mystery...**,
 our sense of **beauty...**,
 our sense of the **presence of the Divine....**

Indeed, *“letting go”* is what **disciples** of **Jesus** *should do best!*

But, what might this look like?

Here are a few **suggestions**:

We might *“let go”* of the **notion**
 that **God** is *only known* through **power** and **might**,
 and not through **wind** and **water**.

As **Jesus** said, *“The wind blows where it chooses,* [John 3:8]
 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.”

We might *“let go”* of the idea that triumph
is not accomplished through trust and truth.

As Jesus said, *“If you continue in my word,
you are truly my disciples;
and you will know the truth,
and the truth will make you free.”*

[John 8:31b-32]

We might *“let go”* of the **belief** that we can *do enough good* to be **righteous**.

As Paul wrote to the Romans,
*“There is no one who is righteous, not even one;
there is not one who has understanding,
there is no one who seeks God.”*

[3:10b-11]

And, we have to *“let go”* of the **fiction** that we can even *be good without God*.

Indeed, we might say the **very essence** – the *dynamic* –
of **discipleship** is *“letting go.”*

And – in *many ways* – the *“Let it Go”* theme is the *very heart*
of the story of Nicodemus.

Jesus is encouraging Nicodemus –
and the Nicodemus in *all of us* –
to *“Let It Go.”*

That is, to *let go* of our desire for *control*,
to let go of our *fear* of change,
to let go of our *cold certainty* –
with regard to *personal* and *denominational* traditions –
and to *yield* to **God’s Spirit**.

First, let go of our FEAR.

Why does **Nicodemus** come to **Jesus** in the *dead of night*?

He is *afraid*.

Nicodemus was a **ruler of the Jews**,
a member of the great **Sanhedrin**,
a *senator*, a *privy-counselor*,
a *man of authority* in **Jerusalem**.

Yet, he calls **Jesus** *rabbi* – *Teacher!*

He is *curiously drawn* to **Jesus**,
and, he *even admits* that **Jesus** *must* be of **God**.

But – nevertheless –
it *would not be cool* to be seen with **Jesus** in the *light of day* –
so he comes under the **cloak of darkness**.

And, **Jesus** is willing to meet with **Nicodemus** in the dark –
even when **Nick** *wasn't willing* to come out into the open.

Jesus then challenges the fear of **Nick**-by-night.

Jesus *challenges him* to go deeper in faith –
beyond *ritual habits*,
beyond *rational beliefs*,
beyond the *safe and predictable*,
and to *step – fearlessly* – “*into the light.*”

Love and **relationships** must *trump fear*; **Spirit** is *everything*.

So, **Jesus** challenges **Nicodemus**:
to enter into a *new dimension*,
to be *born of the Spirit*,
to *dump his fear*,
and to allow *his spirit to be changed*.

And – to *open ourselves* up to the **mystery** of the **Holy Spirit** –
we also must *let go* of our **fear**:
fear of the *unknown*, the *untested*, and the *unexamined*.

Second, let go of our desire to be in CONTROL.

Control is the **major thing** that *prevents us* from “*stepping to the right.*”

We are such **control addicts** that our **discipleship classes**
ought to be called “**AA**” meetings.

That is, **Twelve Steps** to make us “*Alive*” and “*Aware.*”

In our **Gospel reading** today,
Jesus was *doing an intervention* with **Nicodemus** –
helping to make him *alive*, and *aware*.

As we noted, **Nicodemus** was *stuck* in a **left-brain paradigm**.

But, **God** has *given us two-brains* for a *reason* –
God *wants us to be whole* human beings.

If we *dwell only* in our **left brain**, that is a *very limited place*, indeed.

Our **left brain** is *confined* by **rationality**.

Conversely, our **right brain** is *our site* of **creative relationality**.

Wholeness – then – comes *from bringing the two parts together* –
so that we can *feel ourselves open*:
Open to the *mystery* – and *creativity* – of the **Holy Spirit**.

Jesus also challenges **Nicodemus** to be *born anew* –
of **water**, and **wind** –
to *let go of all the status he has attained....*
through his **education**, and **politics**.

Jesus challenges **Nicodemus** to *let go* –
not just of the *past* –
but of his *present* “*concealment*” of his **covert interest** –
in **discipleship**.

That is, to *trust* the **water** – and the **wind** – is
to let the “**storms**” **come** as they will,
to trust in **God’s protection**,
and to take **faith beyond rationality** – and rules,
to *heart* – and *soul* – **relationships**.

When we *let go of everything*,
we make the **paradoxical discovery** that we *truly have everything*.

As *anyone* who has ever *learned to ride* a **bicycle** has learned,
when you let go of your **control**,
you find the **ultimate equilibrium**.

But, the **ultimate paradox** is that we *were never really in control*
in the first place!

Even thinking about being in **control** – *in this life* – is an **illusion!**

And – **third** – let go of our **CERTAINTY**.

Not let go of our **assurance**, *but* let go of our **certainty**.

There is a *big difference* between **assurance** and **certainty**.

We can have *full assurance* of **faith**,
but – even *with* our **faith** – admit to the considerable **uncertainty** –
that *permeates* our **earthly lives**..

That is to say, when **God’s Spirit** blows *new life* into our **lives**,
the **results** are *unpredictable*.

Part of the **image of the wind** – *“blowing where it wills”* –
is the **challenge** to *stop clinging to certainty*, and **predictability**.

And – so – **Jesus** is telling **Nicodemus** to *“Let it go,”*
to *take the risk of faith*,
to be *vulnerable, and open*,
and to *surrender to the Spirit*.

Friends, the fact is that **God** *cares less* about *what we know*
than about *how we love*, and *whom we love*.

And **love** *is not* about **certainty**, or **security**.

We *cannot* be “certain” about **God** –
who *is beyond* our **human comprehension**;
we can only be **certain in our relationship with God**.

Indeed, to be “born” of the **Spirit**
means that the **Spirit of Christ** *lives inside* of us.

You may know that **most babies** *are born with clenched fists*.

And, **growing up** is the *process of relaxing our hands*,
unfurling our fingers,
and *opening our hearts* – in **love**, and in **relationships**.

Growing up spiritually – then – *also involves* learning a **yielding reflex**:
to let go of **control**,
to let go of **fear**,
and to let go of **certainty**.

Indeed, **letting go** is the *distinctive dynamic* of **discipleship**!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)

Adapted from the Confession of 1967

The risen Christ is the Savior for all people. Those joined to him by faith are set right with God, and commissioned to serve as his reconciling community. Christ is head of this community, the church, which began with the apostles and continues through all generations. This same Jesus Christ is the judge of all people. His judgment discloses the ultimate seriousness of life, and gives promise of God's final victory over the power of sin and death. To receive life from the risen Lord is to have life eternal; to refuse life from him is to choose the death which is separation from God. All who put their trust in Christ face divine judgment without fear, for the judge is their Redeemer. Life in Christ is life eternal. The resurrection of Jesus is God's sign that he will consummate his work of creation and reconciliation beyond death, and bring to fulfillment the new life begun in Christ. Thanks be to God! Amen.

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

There is an old Gospel Song:

“He paid a debt He did not owe;
I owed a debt I could not pay;
But Jesus saved me,
and washed my sins away.
And now I sing a brand new song,
‘Amazing grace’ ...”

That is the sum of what Jesus has done for us, and – in order to do it –
he “let go” of everything – even life itself!

Now, his call to us – as it was to Nicodemus –
is to “let go” of anything – and everything –
that hinders our being his faithful disciples
in our own day and time....

Let us receive the Lord's benediction....