

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Robert Alexander, Associate Pastor
“In Life and in Death We Belong to God: Eyes of Faith”
Psalm 121 and John 3:1-17
2nd Sunday in Lent
March 12, 2017

My aunt has a saying. Perhaps you have heard others use it. As she is getting ready for her day she talks about “putting her eyes in.” She cannot see much of anything until she puts her contacts in. These are her eyes which enable her to see things clearly. Lots of us wear contacts or glasses. I have reached that magic age where readers have become necessary unless the light is bright enough and the font large enough. We are grateful for our eye-wear that allows us to see. Those who need it would be in bad shape if we did not have our glasses or contacts. I remember when my sister had corrective surgery years ago that enabled her to see clearly without the use of glasses or contacts. It was almost like getting a new set of eyes! Things that had not been easy to see before suddenly were seen with greater clarity.

In this morning’s text, the Pharisee Nicodemus, a religious leader in his day, went alone and at night to visit Jesus. I always thought the heading in the Bible for this story should read “Nic at Night!” Most of his fellow Pharisees had experienced Jesus as a threat but he had seen something that he was trying to understand. There was something about Jesus that seemed to speak to Nicodemus. “I know that you are a teacher who has come from God.” He said to Jesus. “No one can do what you do apart from the presence of God!”

Jesus responded – “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Exactly how much did Nicodemus see? Many scholars think that he just didn’t get it. There was Jesus, the embodiment of the Kingdom of God standing right in front of him and he didn’t see him for who he was and is. Or did he? He seems to have seen enough to go to Jesus and to seek clarity. It was like he was receiving corrective lenses or vision correction surgery to enable him to see clearly who Jesus is and what it means for him to be bringing about the Kingdom of God. I think he was simply learning to use his eyes of faith.

When Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born from above he may have misunderstood Jesus – thinking that he was saying that he had to be born a second time. The conversation is rather comical. Jesus made it clear that he was not talking about a physical re-birth but rather a spiritual one. You must be born of the Spirit – and this Spirit – like the wind – is unpredictable. You cannot see it coming and you do not know where it is going but you can feel it and you can recognize the effects of that wind! It can blow against your face like a gentle breeze or it can mess up your hair like a stronger wind or it can rip up trees and houses and rearrange your life. This wind – this *pneuma* – this Spirit – changes you!

There are moments in my life when the Spirit has blown through me in such a way that I would say I was re-born. Some people call this conversion. Some think it happens only once in the believer’s life but I think it happens over and over again. And the gift of that experience is not to point to a Re-Birth Certificate hanging on my wall or sitting in my Christian Baby Book. “Look at this! It says I was reborn!” But rather to see and experience the effect of a life that is changed from the inside out by the Spirit of God. Another gift of being born from above is the ability to see more and more clearly the Kingdom of God in our midst and to see it born in us! In you and in

me! This is what I mean by having eyes of faith. We see ourselves, each other, and the world through new eyes that have been changed by God's grace and love.

Several years ago, Mel Gibson and Joaquin Phoenix starred in the movie Signs. The movie was about a family that faced the reality of visitors from another galaxy. The father, Graham Hess, played by Mel Gibson, was a "man of the cloth" who had lost his faith after the death of his wife. In one scene, the family sits in front of the TV to try and understand the meaning of the 14 lights that have mysteriously appeared in the sky.

(VIDEO CLIP) Hess explains his understanding of the two categories of people that exist in the world as it relates to faith. "People break into two groups," he says. The first group, looks at life through the eyes of faith believing that there are signs in the world that give evidence of one who is watching out for them and who cares for them. This fills them with hope and with comfort. The second group sees the world through eyes of chance, luck, or coincidence. Life is a 50-50 proposition. It could go either way and no matter which way it goes they believe they are alone and that fills them with fear. So Hess tells his brother that he has to decide which group he is going to be in. If he chooses the first group then no matter what happens he can find comfort in the belief that he is not alone and that there is someone there to go through it with him.

Is it that simple? Do we simply choose to which group we want to belong? Can I will myself toward faith and the belief that God is with me and that in life and in death I belong to God? Can I simply choose to believe? I mean where were the other 71 members of the Sanhedrin while Nicodemus was speaking with Jesus that night? Was he the only one of that group who saw something amazing and wonderful in Jesus? Or was he the only one who acted on that seed of faith that was growing in him? What brings about faith in an individual?

I have to say that I have struggled with this much of my adult life as I have watched some embrace the faith which is so central to my life and I have watched others walk away from it. "How can they not see?" I have wondered. Are there some like the rich young ruler, who have come to Jesus but were unwilling to give up what Jesus asked of them? I honestly don't know. In my heart of hearts I believe that faith is a gift from God and is possible for everyone but it is a mystery to me why some seem to have that life and those eyes of faith more firmly placed than others.

Eyes of faith invite us to see the world with hope, love, compassion, and justice. They invite us to see where the Spirit of God is at work in the world and to engage with that work. They invite us to see the world as a way to connect with the deeper, spiritual truths that are the currents which connect all of life and humanity. Here is an example of what I mean. On a run the other morning I saw many things. Among them were a father and son waiting for a school bus; an old dilapidated house that was falling down; a tree that was being cut down; a hawk that took off from a tree branch right in front of me.

As I saw each of these things I was drawn to various reflections. The father and son were a reminder of God's care for us and the scripture that we often hear at baptism – "See what love the Father has for us – that we should be called children of God." The dilapidated house reminded me of the words of Jesus at the end of the Sermon on the Mount – the one who hears my words and doesn't act on them is like the man who built his house on the sand – the rains

came and the winds blew against the house and it fell!" The tree reminded me of the verse in John that tells us that every tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. The hawk reminded me of the Psalm telling us that God covers us with his feathers and that under God's wings we can find refuge.

One more from this morning – Isaiah tells us that though our sins are like scarlet, in God's Kingdom they will be as white as snow. A reminder of God's amazing forgiveness. You see – the Eyes of faith connect us with the truths of scripture and of the Kingdom of God. They help us see where God is at work in the world and in us.

But I admit - there is a lot in the world that is hard to make sense of. What about the family that struggles with cancer, or the loss of a child, or an ongoing addiction? What about the person who seems to get more than their fair share of trouble? What about the community that is devastated by a tornado or a flood? What about the community of people that has to flee their homeland and become refugees because they are targeted for annihilation by a group that wants to see them wiped off the face of the earth? What about the mother who has to watch her baby die of starvation?

With so much terrible news in the world we might wonder how the Kingdom of God is at hand and how we are expected to have faith that God is at work. And I get that. There is a lot of bad. And we have no right, as Lib mentioned last week, to tell anyone that their tragedy or struggle is the will of God. That is not for us to say.

It may be a fair question for me to ask of God, however. As I wrestle with my own struggle I may ask the question of God – What is this all about? Is this your doing? What are you up to Lord? Is there something I am supposed to be learning from this? Are you calling me to do something about this? I may even get mad at God and express my frustration at what seems unfair and unjust. I am certain that if these thoughts and prayers are in my heart that it is far better for me to come to God and express them in honesty than to hold them inside and slowly lose my faith.

Kent Annan, in his book Slow Kingdom Coming, wrestles with his own frustration at not always seeing what God is up to in the world. He writes about how for years he got overwhelmed with the work that he did to try and make a difference for God's glory. He writes, "I've been paralyzed by the complexity of trying to help others."ⁱ He has come to believe that God is answering the prayer, "Thy Kingdom come...Thy will be done...On earth as it is in heaven" but that it is a much slower process that many of us would like to accept. He claims that if we are patient and if we have eyes to see, that we can see what God is up to and we can latch on to that and allow that wind to take us to exciting places. His book is about several practices that help him in this process. It might be a good book for us to read together.

It helps me imagine a sailboat in the open water looking for the wind to reveal itself and then at the right moment lifting a sail to catch that wind and move. This is not paralysis...this is being open to going where the Spirit desires rather than where we desire. This is about looking for God's Kingdom with eyes of faith that catch the glimpses of the effects of the wind of the Spirit.

Sure, it's easy to find ourselves paralyzed by global terror, destructive poverty, overwhelming numbers of refugees, and natural disasters. Or closer to home, its easy to get overwhelmed by midterms and papers, or cyber bullying, or terrifying test results, or too many bills to keep up with, or too many kids schedules to keep track of, or too much information through our inboxes. This can all lead us into a dark tunnel of uncertainty, despair, and doubt. Before long we have covered our eyes and we cannot even begin to see the glimpses of God's presence and God's grace.

But the Kingdom of God is at hand. So maybe we can have eyes of faith to see it. There are millions of children around the world who are in need...it is true...but there is one little boy in Haiti named Edlet that I know is doing well because Jenny and I have been sponsoring him for 12 years through Compassion International. There are lots of ways to sponsor children so maybe you could look into it. Every time we receive an update about Edlet and his community we are encouraged by the way we see the Spirit of God moving in the world.

Speaking of children Our partnership with Blythe Elementary school in Huntersville is a place where the Spirit of God is moving...bringing about transformation, partnership, and hope. As members of DCPC connect with the families of students, teachers, and staff we see the ways that lives are bring transformed. If you want to get involved check out the mini-day of service this coming Saturday!

We have global partnerships in Kenya and Nicaragua. Our Kenya partners were here recently and told us about their need for furniture for the children in their school...the school that DCPC helped them build. Yesterday I received a picture of some of the new furniture that they have purchased with support from you! Today 15 of our members are meeting to begin preparation to go there in June. I am encouraged by the way that I see the Spirit of God moving in this partnership.

A couple of years ago we asked you to help fund a preschool building in San Felipe, Kilambe, Nicaragua. 17 of us went and helped begin this project. Today, children are studying and learning in the school room. They are more fully realizing their potential as children of God thanks to your generosity and your interest...and thanks to the movement of the Spirit of God in that partnership. Encouraging! That team also meets today for their first meeting – and there are still spots open and available for you if you feel the Spirit leading you to see some Kingdom work there!

I am sure there are countless stories that could be shared of places where you have seen God's Spirit on the move...where the effects of the wind of the Spirit have been seen and experienced. And we must continue to train our eyes to look and to see and to celebrate and to step out in faith and join the movement of God's Spirit.

Nicodemus gives us a model. Go to Jesus and ask him about it. What if all of us – **tonight** – took time to reflect over the things that we saw today and asked God about them in prayer. Hey God – you know that argument that I had with my family member? You know that accident that I saw on I-77? You know that email I received about my friend's cancer diagnosis? You know the headline I read about the terrible hunger in Sudan? You know the way my teacher

treats me so unfairly? You know how that boy I like was mean to me in the hallway? Where are you in that? Help me to see you more clearly and help me to see the evidence of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps in a conversation with Jesus you may have eyes to see an opportunity to practice penitence and forgiveness; or a way to recognize and appreciate the emergency workers in our community; or a way to surround someone in need with support; or a chance to celebrate the good work of a hunger relief agency or a group lobbying for better funding for aid to those in need; or a way to appreciate a friend who was there to walk with you through a difficult day.

Eyes of faith are able, along with the Psalmist, to declare, "I lift my eyes to the hills...from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord...the maker of heaven and earth!" And they are able to see again the promise that Jesus gave Nicodemus...that God sent his only son into the world to save it – not to condemn it.

So friends – put on your eyes of faith – and believe – and live as the free – saved – holy people of God – catching the wind of God's Spirit and allowing it to take us to the places where we most need to be.

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ Kent Anna, Slow Kingdom Coming, InterVarsity Press. 2016. P. 9