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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

Mysterious Encounter

*A Sermon by*

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

Scripture: John 3:1-17

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Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ  
555 West Glendale Avenue • Phoenix, Arizona 85021  
602-264-1221 • [info@beatitudeschurch.org](mailto:info@beatitudeschurch.org)  
[www.beatitudeschurch.org](http://www.beatitudeschurch.org)

🎵 God is still speaking,

Nicodemus paused in the narrow street of Jerusalem and pulled out his Blackberry. How else would he remember he had an appointment with Jesus? He was a ‘Supreme Court Justice’ and had sat all day in the Hall of Hewn Stones built in the north wall of the Temple, half inside the sanctuary, half outside. 71 Supreme Court Justices, this Sanhedrin, meeting all day, every day, hearing matters of inquiry about the law from two other inferior courts, each of those 23 members.<sup>1</sup> Imagine how long those confirmation hearings lasted!

Nicodemus had not always been a Supreme Court Justice. He had grown up through the ranks like all the rest. A Jew, once a common laborer perhaps, who began, in his spare time, to study Torah and then to teach. His family had lived through exile and persecution. He knew the stories passed on through generations, of living in Babylon and coming home. He knew the stories of persecution by Greek conquerors and now Roman conquerors. Nicodemus longed for basic human rights, freedom of soul and spirit, and firmly believed “the best hope for the future lay in devotion to God...study the Torah to discover how best to live according to the law.”<sup>2</sup> This is what the Pharisees were about. They were the ‘separated ones’, not the aristocrats, but the ‘Joe the plumbers’, trying, trying, desperately trying, to live in trying times.

The Blackberry said eight o’clock, meet by the pools of Siloam, far enough away from the Temple Mount, still close enough that they could talk and perhaps dangle their feet in the cool and healing waters.

Yeshua, Jesus, who are you and how did you get here? People from all over are listening to you, coming to you for healing. I too believe in the Resurrection, unlike those Sadducees. But you are talking about ‘eternal life’. What do you mean? Why should I believe you? Why should I accept what you are saying as true?

A woman shows you a picture of herself climbing the rock face of a mountain, tells you it can be done, and you say, “I believe you.” You accept the proposition. You give your intellectual assent, but it does not interfere with the way you live your life, because it is all in your head.

There is another level of belief. Instead of showing you the pictures, now the woman invites you to go rock climbing with her. As she checks the knots on your harness and runs your safety line through the carabiner around her own waist, she assures you that everything will be all right. The proper response at that point is not “I believe you” but “I believe in you”. Here you are, way past anything like intellectual assent. You have set yourself in relationship with this person and you are trusting her with your life.

Nicodemus was halfway there. He came by night to interview the new teacher in town. He knew the teacher was good—he had checked Jesus’ references—but he wanted more information. He wanted to see the accident reports, check out the insurance coverage. He wanted to handle the equipment, maybe try it on for size. He wanted the teacher to say

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hall\\_of\\_Hewn\\_Stones#cite\\_note-1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hall_of_Hewn_Stones#cite_note-1)

<sup>2</sup> Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg, *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus*, Zondervan, p. 238.

something that would take away his doubts and make it easy for him to say yes, but the teacher would not cooperate.

Believe in me, Nicodemus. Step into the air. Ride the wind. Be born anew. Live.”<sup>3</sup>

I ask myself, do I believe Jesus or do I believe in Jesus? I am not the rock climber in the family. As you can imagine that is Pastor Ted and Kaitlin, our daughter. That’s not totally true, because I have done the ropes courses with our confirmation classes and climbed that wall four stories high. Maybe what gave me the most comfort the first time was that one of the instructors on that ropes course said he was afraid of heights. Yet his job was to lead people to faith in themselves and their abilities, to overcome fears, to ride the wind, to live. How did he do it, day after day? “I had to learn to trust the equipment, the ropes, the carabiners, my partners. Put your left hand up, now bring up your right foot. Don’t think about it too hard. Listen to my voice.”

Huh, isn’t that what Jesus said? Follow my voice. Do the things I do. Let go of old hurts. Run for dear life from evil. Love from the center of who you are. Practice hospitality. Be generous in all things.

What if you treated others like you would like to be treated? Eat at my table and drink from my cup.

There are a lot of other cups out there from which we could drink. The cup of fear. The cup of scarcity. Maybe that is the same cup. The cup of revenge or one-upmanship. The cup of I win, you lose; I have, you have not; I’m better, you are less; I’m found, you’re lost. I have a gun, you don’t. I can walk into a church and kill a doctor with whom I disagree.

Is this what Jesus meant when he said in John 3:16, the most quoted Bible verse, especially at baseball games?

After talking with Jesus for a little while, late at night, feet dangled into the healing pools, the Blackberry chiming the next appointment, Nicodemus, I think, not only believed Jesus, he believed in Jesus.

It’s not enough, Nicodemus learned, to sit in the Temple, 71 learned men, debating the law, debating good sermon, bad sermon, debating, dare I say it, spend the endowment, save the endowment. It took Nicodemus stepping outside of the law, outside of his ‘sanctuary’, to find his life.

I imagine he lost his pension, his 401(k), his reserved parking spot under the covered Temple parking, even his Temple Blackberry and all his rollover minutes. Nicodemus stepped into the air, rode the wind, and was born into a new way of life and living. We know that he became a follower of Jesus and after the crucifixion, he brought the 100 pounds of spices to prepare the body for burial in that borrowed family grave.

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<sup>3</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, “Stay for Tea, Nicodemus”, Christian Century, 1996, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1058/is\\_n6\\_v113/ai\\_18042032/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n6_v113/ai_18042032/)

We just lived a Pentecost moment when a New Spirit lit us on fire. If that fire still burns in us, we live not simply wishing that our lives will improve. Rather we believe in and fully expect that God's life, breathed into our current circumstances will bring new life. To us, to the world, to all the people.

A Michael W. Smith song we sing says it this way

This is the air I breathe  
this is the air I breathe  
Your holy presence living in me

This is my daily bread  
this is my daily bread  
Your very word spoken to me

And I, I'm desperate for you  
And I, I'm lost without you

We are the living, breathing, hoping, anticipating, resurrecting community of people who say not only I believe Jesus, but also I believe in Jesus. Through Jesus all things, not some things, are possible. With Jesus, who is my path to God, we, I can do all things.

Amen.