

## “Nic at Night”

Date: March 20, 2011  
Place: Lakewood UMC  
Text: John 3:1-17  
Theme: rebirth; eternal life  
Occasion: Lent 2, year A

I'd like to begin my sermon this morning by telling a story. His name was Paul. He lived in a small town in the Pacific Northwest, some years ago. He was just a little boy when his family became the proud owners of one of the first telephones in the neighborhood. It was one of those wooden boxes attached to the wall, with the shiny receiver hanging on the side of the box, and the mouthpiece attached to the front. Have any of you seen pictures of those old phones?

Young Paul listened with fascination as his mom and dad used the phone, and he discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device called a *telephone* there lived an amazing person. Her name was “Information Please.” And there was nothing she did not know. Information Please could supply anybody's phone number, AND the correct time!

Paul's first experience with Information Please came one day when he was home alone and he whacked his finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible and he didn't know what to do. And then he thought of the telephone. Quickly, he pulled a footstool up to the phone, climbed up, unhooked the receiver, held it to his ear and said, “Information Please.” whimpering into the mouthpiece.

There was a click or two, and then a small clear voice spoke. “Information.” Paul wailed into the phone, “I hurt my finger.” Isn't your mother home? “Nobody's home but me,” Paul cried. Are you bleeding? “No,” Paul said. “I hit my finger with the hammer and it hurts.” Can you open your ice-box? “Yes.” Then go get some ice and hold it to your finger. Paul did, and it helped a lot.

After that, Paul called Information Please for everything. She helped him

with his geography and his math. She taught him how to spell the word *fix*. She told him what to feed his pet chipmunk. And then, when Paul's canary died, she listened to his grief tenderly, and then she said, "Paul, always remember, that there are other worlds to sing in." Somehow that helped, and Paul felt better.

When Paul was nine years old, he moved with his family to Boston. And as the years passed he missed Information Please very much. Some years later, Paul was on his way out west to go to college, his plane landed in Seattle. He dialed his hometown operator and said, "Information Please." Miraculously he heard that same, small clear voice that he knew so well.

Paul hadn't planned this, but suddenly he blurted out, "Could you please tell me how to spell the word *fix*?" There was a long pause, then came the soft answer. "I guess your finger must be healed by now." Paul laughed. "So, it's really you. Do you have any idea how much you meant to me during that time when I was a little boy?"

"I wonder," she said, "if you know how much your calls meant to me! I never had any children, and used to look forward to your calls so much." Paul told her how he had missed her over the years, and asked if he could call her again when he was back in the area. "Please do," she said, "just ask for Sally."

Three months later, Paul was back in Seattle. This time a different voice answered. He asked for Sally. "Are you a friend?" the operator asked. "Yes, my name is Paul, and I'm a very old friend of her." "Well, I'm sorry to have to tell you this," she said. "Sally had been working part time the past few years because she was sick. She died a few weeks ago."

Before he could hang up, the operator said, "Wait a minute. Did you say that your name was Paul?" Yes. "Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down

in case you called. Let me read it to you. It says, “When Paul calls, tell him that I still say ‘there are other worlds to sing in.’ He’ll understand what I mean.” Paul thanked her and hung up. And he did know, exactly what Sally meant.

**There are other worlds to sing in.** Isn’t that a beautiful and powerful thought? That is precisely what John 3 is all about. **There are other worlds to sing in.** Bot in this life, and even beyond this life.

When Jesus said to Nicodemus that night, “You must be born again, you must be born from above,” that’s what he meant. You don’t have to say the way you are. You can make a new start. You can have a new life. You can become a new person. There are other worlds to sing in.

Remember the story with me. Nicodemus was a key leader among the Jews in the time of Jesus. He was probably from a wealthy, distinguished and highly respected family. He was a Pharisee, one of a brotherhood of about 6,000 who had taken a pledge that they would dedicate their lives to observing every detail of the scribal law. The Scribes worked out the regulations, and the Pharisees consecrated their lives to keeping them, to the nth degree.

In addition, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of the Jews. The Sanhedrin had only 70 members, out of the 6,000 Pharisees. The top 70 made up the Sanhedrin jury, and Nicodemus was one of them. The Sanhedrin had religious authority over every Jew in the world, and one of its primary duties was to examine and deal with anyone who was accused of being a false prophet.

Nicodemus came to visit Jesus at night. That’s where the sermon title came from, “Nic at Night.” Biblical scholars have written a lot about why they think he came at night. Was he afraid of “guilt by association?” Was he afraid of what the

other Pharisees would say or think about him? Or, did he simply want to have a private audience with Jesus, where they could talk and not be disturbed?

All of these are fascinating questions, but what is amazing is that he came to Jesus at all. The other Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat. But Nicodemus came to Jesus and said, “Rabbi, you must be a teacher who has come from God. Because no one could do the signs and wonders that you do, apart from the presence of God.”

And Jesus responded to him by saying, “You can’t see the Kingdom of God, without being born again. You must be born from above.” Now what does that mean?

It means that you can’t become a Christian by making a few minor adjustments in your life. It must be a complete turn-around, a radical re-birth, a re-birth that comes from above, which of course means a new life from God. Nicodemus didn’t understand.

He didn’t get it. So Jesus explained, with what many have called the greatest verse in the Bible, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

That’s not just a good verse to be able to quote, so that someday you can get into Heaven. Jesus is talking about a new way of living, while we’re still alive. God sent His only Son to make something out of us. When we accept Jesus into our lives, and commit our hearts to Him, then Jesus gives us new life in this world.

God’s amazing love is meant to transform us. A good example of such transformation is found in the story of Dulcinea, one of the principal characters in the popular Broadway musical *Man of la Mancha*. The audience learns that Don Quixote, the main character, lives with many illusions. Chief among them the idea that he is a knight who does battle with dragons, in the form of windmills.

At the end of the play, as he lays dying, Don Quixote has at his side a prostitute, Aldonza, who he has called throughout the play, *Dulcinea*, Sweet One, much to the laughter of the local townsfolk who know her as the town tramp. But Don Quixote has loved her in a way unlike she has ever experienced.

When Don Quixote breathes his last breath, Aldonza begins to sing “The Impossible Dream.” As the echo of this song dies away, someone shouts to her, “Aldonza!” But she pulls away proudly and responds, “My name is Dulcinea!” why the change? The crazy knight’s love had transformed her.

That’s what it means to say “to be born again.” That’s what it means to say “there are other worlds to sing in.” Not just after we die

So how do we get to that other world? It’s called faith. It’s called grace. It’s putting your trust in God’s love, and not in yourself. It’s committing your life to living for Jesus, but trusting Him to make you into the person he wants you to be.

The door that needs to new life is called grace. The door that enters into Heaven is called grace. It’s God work in us. Put your faith and your trust in God’s love. And God promises, there are other worlds to sing in. Thanks be to God! Amen.