**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC May 31, 2015**

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***How Can These Things Be?***

**A Sermon for Trinity Sunday by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**THE OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS** Isaiah 6:1-8

The Old Testament Witness for today tells the story of Isaiah being called and cleansed to be God’s prophet. As a point of reference, seraphim and cherubim are angels. In the hierarchy of angels, which probably dates to the Victorian era, seraphim are of the highest order of angels, with cherubim just below them.

However, seraphim and cherubim are quite different. Seraphim are fierce, related to scorpions. Seraphim are fighters, while cherubim are sweet, chubby children, the cherubs with bows and arrows often seen on Valentine’s Day cards. In today’s Old Testament Witness, the seraphim are attending to the Lord God. They say, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts,” which sounds a lot like our closing hymn for today.

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS**  John 3:1-17

The Gospel Witness for today tells the story of Nicodemus, a religious leader of the Jews who comes by night to speak with Jesus privately. Nicodemus recognizes that Jesus speaks and acts with authority from God. Although knowledgeable in religious law, Nicodemus wants to learn more about the law of love that Jesus is preaching. The Gospel Witness for today includes John 3:16, “God so loved the world …” Martin Luther called John 3:16 “the Gospel in miniature.”

**SERMON**

Nicodemus, who comes by night to speak with Jesus is a learned man. He is a Pharisee, a scholar, an expert in Jewish religious law. Nicodemus is also a powerful man, a leader, a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council of seventy-one members that combines executive, legislative and judicial functions in one body.

Nicodemus is a just man, for in John 7:50-52, when the chief priests and other Pharisees ask him why Jesus has not been arrested, Nicodemus answers, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?”

Nicodemus is also a rich man. Quoting from John 19:39-40 (After Jesus was crucified) “Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about one hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.” That one hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes represents the incredible wealth and the great devotion of Nicodemus to Jesus.

Nicodemus: a man learned, powerful, just, and rich comes to Jesus *by night.* Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night because he wants to speak with Jesus privately, away from the daytime crowds and when Jesus’ disciples would be elsewhere.

Nicodemus may also have visited Jesus by night because he did not want to be seen associating with Jesus. Other Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin thought Jesus was blaspheming God by claiming the authority to speak for God as God’s Son. Nicodemus thought otherwise and chose to speak with Jesus himself and to decide for himself.

Nicodemus asks Jesus three questions but does not begin the conversation with a question. Nicodemus honors Jesus and shows respect by saying, “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 responds to Nicodemus, not by acknowledging his own divine authority as unique, but by explaining the source of divine authority, saying: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Jesus is speaking metaphorically, about spiritual rebirth, but Nicodemus is hanging onto Jesus’ every word, interpreting what Jesus is saying literally. Nicodemus asks Jesus: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter into a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus is patient and answers, “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Now Jesus is talking about actual water, H2O, the water of baptism, as well as the Spirit of God.

The final question that Nicodemus has for Jesus is simply this: “How can these things be?”

Jesus answers Nicodemus with a combination of metaphor and actuality, ending his explanation with words both simple and divine, words that have echoed from that night throughout history: “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.” (John 3:16 NRSV)

Jesus must have hit a responsive chord in Nicodemus, for literal Nicodemus finally understands that “God so loves the world that he gave his only Son.” Nicodemus has no more questions, at least none that are recorded.

Jesus may have smiled at the final question of Nicodemus, “How can these things be?” because his mother Mary had asked the very same question of the angel Gabriel, and Mary may have told her son the story.

When Gabriel tells Mary that she is with child of the Holy Spirit and that she will bear a son and call him “Jesus,” Mary asks Gabriel, “How can these things be? Since I have not known a man.” Gabriel answers, “With God, nothing is impossible. All things are possible.” Mary graciously accepts God’s command. She responds to Gabriel, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be unto me according to thy word.”

Gabriel then departs, and Mary soon packs her bag and goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is also pregnant, to share Gabriel's message. (Luke 1:26-56 KJV) In some Church traditions, today, May 31st, is celebrated as the Feast of the Visit of Mary to Elizabeth.

And of course the question, “How can these things be?” is not unique to Mary and Nicodemus. “How can these things be?” may be a question that we ourselves ask, that we ourselves ask of God.

What about the miracles in the Bible? What about the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, the Ascension and Pentecost? What about the miracle of life? And what about eternal life after death? What about all the suffering in the world, and what about the suffering of my friends and family, not to mention my own suffering? How can these things be?

And since today is Trinity Sunday, we might well be asking, “What about the Trinity? How can God be three-in-one and one-in-three? How can these things be?”

To answer questions we may have about the Trinity, I am going to follow the example of our great Teacher and use a combination of metaphor and reality. For in matters of faith, both poetry and prose are necessary, as literal-minded Nicodemus learned in speaking with Jesus.

God is one. God is the one and only God. God is our God, and some of us may believe that God is the God of all religions. God always was and always will be. God is unknowable, beyond our comprehension, indefinable. In God’s mystery as Creator, God is holy and deserving of awe and worship.

Yet the unknowable God becomes flesh in Jesus Christ, so that the will of God for humankind may be made clear. Through the teaching, miracles, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we learn and understand that God wills us to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

God the great unknown chooses to become known to us in Jesus Christ our Lord, who gives us the sacraments of Baptism and Communion.

When Jesus leaves us and ascends to God after the Resurrection, Jesus sends the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to be God’s new and gracious presence in our lives. Although we pray to God, God acts on our behalf through the Holy Spirit, sometimes called the Comforter.

God is God. God is One, but as Christians, we experience God through Jesus and the grace of the Holy Spirit. So for us, God is Three. God is One in Three.

I like to think of the Trinity as an equilateral triangle, with God at the top angle and Jesus and the Holy Spirit at each of the two bottom angles. There is a dynamic tension between the three angles, but each needs the other to be whole. Each is 60 degrees, with arms reaching for each other and to us.

Without Jesus and Mary the mother of Jesus, to show us the way, and without Moses, Mohammed Buddha and Confucius to show others the way, God remains in the clouds, the Great Unknown, a mystery, deserving awe and respect, but undefined. It is through God’s revelation in human form, for Christians in Jesus Christ, that we learn about God, that we experience God.

I think William Sloane Coffin, who was Chaplain of Yale University and later Senior Minister of Riverside Church says it best: “Jesus is both a mirror to our humanity and a window to divinity, a window revealing as much of God as is given mortal eyes to see.” As Christians, when we look at Jesus, we see God, and we see ourselves. When looking at our Lord, we see ourselves as we would like to be, as we are called to be.

In Biblical art, the Holy Spirit is frequently portrayed as a dove, smaller in size than God and Jesus, but a bright and powerful presence in its own right. Our bulletin cover this morning shows a beautiful bronze sculpture in County Clare, Ireland, representing the dove of the Holy Spirit

And while I think that the dove is a fine metaphor for the Holy Spirit, personally, I like the dragonfly better. I like the dragonfly for its beauty, its grace and its unpredictability. Like the Holy Spirit, the dragonfly goes where it will and surprises us.

So how can God be three in one and one in three? How can these things be? An anonymous Celtic poem about the Trinity may hold the answer:

*Three folds of the cloth, yet only one napkin is there,*

*Three joints in the finger, but still only one finger fair,*

*Three leaves of the shamrock, yet no more than one shamrock to wear,*

*Frost, snowflakes and ice, all in water their origin share,*

*Three Persons in God: to one God alone we make our prayer.*

We make our prayer to God through the love made known to us in Jesus Christ our Lord, and with the grace of the Holy Spirit over us, around us and in us. Amen.