

Dancing in the Spirit
John 3:1-10
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
May 27, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

“After all, I needed to get to the next thing.”

Have you ever felt that, seen that, lived that? Have you seen others rushing by on the interstate or hurrying through the stoplight on Tamiami Trail? Have you felt that impetus and energy within yourself, pushing you, pushing you to hurry? Have you measured your days and your ways by the number of achievements you can pack into one 8-to-5 block of time?

After all, I needed to get to the next thing.

God help me, I felt it just last Sunday. There are about eight hundred and fifty members of our church, both Sarasota-based and seasonal, and last Sunday morning, about three hundred of us were gathered, here. I wanted to connect with as many of you as possible. I had a card with twenty names on it in my pocket, those with twisted ankle and upcoming surgery and radiation treatments and further testing, those wondering if the cure worked and those going back for another infusion and those getting injections and those moving this week, those who are suffering and questioning and giving thanks and looking at the future differently.

I hurried. Sometimes that becomes one of the best parts of my ministry, enabling me to speak and listen to as many people as possible. Sometimes it's one of the worst parts of my ministry. One of my good friends here three months ago said it to me straight, “Don't move around so much. Don't hurry off to the next thing.”

But “after all, I needed to get to the next thing.” That's what a friend wrote and posted on social media last week. He posted a photo of a beautiful little turtle, with an orange and dark green shell among leaves and twigs.

He wrote this, “It would have been easy to drive past him, leaving him to fate. After all, I needed to get to the next thing. But something . . . caused me to stop my foolishness, turn around, and move the little turtle from the road. It was a simple turning. Is all turning simple? All I know is that I feel much better and more grateful than if I had carried on leaving the turtle alone.”

I needed to get to the next thing the day I wrote this sermon. I hurried by three other people I saw in a restaurant that afternoon, when I had gone to get a quick soda and do a little reading. The wife, the mother was still in her hospital gown, in this restaurant right across the street from the hospital. She looked tired and worried. But I did not stop to talk.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish council, a scribe. He comes by night to learn more about Jesus. Later in John he defends Jesus before the council. Toward the end of the Gospel he provides the spices for Jesus' burial.

I imagine Nicodemus as learned and wise. I imagine he is a busy person. Perhaps he came to Jesus at night because he did not want to lose the support and understanding of the others on the council. Perhaps he came to Jesus at night because he was hurrying through his day.

He starts the way we expect, saying to Jesus, “Teacher, we know you come from God, for you do so many good things that can only occur through God's presence.”

And then, right then, Jesus zooms right past him. “You must be born from above,” he says. “You must be born again, a second time. You must be born of the Holy Spirit.”

You must be renewed as a spiritual child, as nothing less than a child of God. You must live out beyond the edge of comfort. You must make yourself at home with uncertainty. You must trust and obey and turn when you least expect, always open to God's moment-to-moment direction.

For the Spirit, the Wind, the very Breath of God moves in us and acts in our world in ways we cannot always completely understand. So we listen and follow as best we can, as God's spiritual children.

There is something critically important about this self-identification as God's spiritual children. It's there in the motto of the LOGOS Program for children and youth, "You are a child of God, and I will treat you that way. It's there as Jill Duffield, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook* and our former Faith Focus Weekend speaker, shares her baseline moral framework. This is it: "I believe everyone is a beloved child of God made in God's image."

But we don't think enough about the reality of *child* of God.

Think about it. It's right there in the John lesson, as Jesus says, "Do you want to experience God? You must be a youngster in spirit. You must be born anew, born again, born from above." It's right there in the Romans lesson, as Paul says, "It is the spiritual children, the spiritual toddlers and young ones, who are led by the Spirit."

We discover God when we let go of fear and irritation and hold fast to curiosity and wonder. We discover God not only when we pray with measured phrases and beautiful language, but when we speak from the heart, when we cry out, "Thank you! Oh, thank you!" or "Help me! Oh, dear Jesus, help me!"

It's right there in Luke's Gospel in the tenth chapter. Jesus visits the home of Mary and Martha, and Mary wants one thing, one thing, to be with Jesus, to listen to his word and ways, to learn how to live his word and his ways. Martha – O Martha! My sister! My twin sister! – Martha needs to get to the next thing. She is serving and hosting, distracted, worrying. But Mary, Mary is living in the instant, living the one thing, the present, leaning into the Wind, searching for the Spirit, hearing God's voice right now.

Mary is living as a child. As God's child.

Oh, people, don't get me wrong! I love a plan! Because of the great planning of Carol Papa and Scott Carter and Beth Byron-Reasoner and Adam Martin and Charlie Stottlemeyer and Cord Van Nostrand, our Imagine the Future capital campaign is sending out generous gifts this year to Beth-El Farmworker Ministry and Family Promise and Fuller Center for Housing and Cedarkirk Camp and Conference Center and the PC(USA) South Sudan Peacebuilding and Educational Initiative and our Invest in Children partnership with Brentwood Elementary School.

Because of great planning we will complete the last part of our capital reconstruction in a few more months with a new stage in a renewed fellowship hall. Because of great planning by Steven Phillips and our Oak Street team we will welcome the community to a series of inviting concerts in the years ahead. Because of great planning by Kelly Fitzgerald and our family ministry program, our youth are headed to Montreat and Maryville and the Raleigh Youth Mission this summer.

But sometimes we Presbyterians think it is *all about the plan*. And we lose ourselves in thinking and fretting and worrying. Suddenly we are no longer children. Suddenly, we think our lives are mainly up to us. Suddenly, our name is Nicodemus or Martha.

After all, we think we need to get to the next thing.

This morning God invites us to lay down our burdens, to be renewed as a spiritual child, as nothing less than God's child. This morning God invites us to make ourselves at home with some uncertainty, to live out beyond the edge of comfort. This morning God invites us to declare that our faith and trust in God is enough.

This morning God invites us to open ourselves to new direction, to God's direction, through horror or through joy.

Two days ago on Friday morning was the horror: A middle-school student in Noblesville, Indiana excused himself from class, and returned a moment later with two guns. He began shooting his classmates. Again, our children at risk! Again, our children at risk, simply from sitting in a classroom!

It was a surreal day for Anne and me. That middle school is only a few miles from our former home in Indianapolis. Anne's cousin, Kevin, is the police chief there in Noblesville. We saw Kevin on the national news.

The student began shooting on Friday morning, and the teacher, Jason Seaman, moved toward the danger. He gave up all his plans; he moved toward the danger. He swatted the gun from the student's hand. He was shot three times as he disarmed him. He was willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of his students.

Later, teacher Jason Seaman made this statement, "I want everyone to know that I was injured but am doing great. And to all the students, you are all wonderful, and I thank you for your support. You are the reason I teach."

God leads us into the unexpected.

This morning God invites us to open ourselves to new direction, to God's direction, through horror or through joy.

Two weeks ago on Mother's Day was the joy: We presented Bibles to thirteen of our elementary school students. Each is now old enough to cherish and value reading their very own Bible. It was a fun morning, with almost all of the students present. Kelly and I went through the same liturgy and prayer for both worship experiences. At the 11:00 am service, I stood right next to one student. I have watched him grow up. I was glad for the opportunity to place my hand on his shoulder as I prayed.

Do you know what he said to me, just as I finished praying? Do you know what he said, after the statement, the presentation and the prayer, just before he headed back to his seat? He said, "Aaaa!"

I loved it. He had been appropriate and reverent through the entire presentation, but there at the end he said the same sort of thing he would at home, because *here he is at home*. Here he is a child of God, able to laugh and cry and sing and be silly.

Sisters and brothers, in Christ's name, give up just getting to the next thing. Turn aside, rest in the beauty, feel the Wind on your face, listen for God's voice.

Every hour be born anew, be born again, be born from above. Celebrate that you are a child of God. Dance in the joy of the Holy Spirit.