

To “my friend,” Glenn Wheeler, an inveterate Dylan fan.

“The answer, my friend...”

Lent 2 – Year A: John 3:1-17

Bob Dylan was born during the Second World War, but most of his life before he wrote *Blowin’ in the Wind* was lived during the anxious years of the Cold War when the threat of either America or the USSR launching a nuclear attack seemed inevitable. The political developments in Cuba with President Fidel Castro aligning Cuba with the USSR only made the Cold War colder for America’s youth, desperately trying to imagine hope amidst the present possibility of the annihilation of everything. Dylan was also aware of how unchecked racism was in American society; of how segregation and open discrimination against Blacks was tolerated by most white Americans. And so, in a song he wrote from the heart, Bob Dylan asked difficult questions about war and peace – about cannon balls flying and the white dove of peace dying; about the impossibility of freedom as long as people turned their heads to keep from seeing racism and closed their ears to keep from hearing the desperate cries of their neighbours in distress. And then, borrowing an image from Woody Guthrie’s book *Bound For Glory*, the image of sheets of newspaper blowing around the streets and alleys of New York City, Dylan told his audience that the answer to these haunting, disturbing questions was “blowin’ in the wind.” The answer, the answers, elusive, hard to catch, were harder even to identify as the correct ones – so many papers, many beyond reach, he suggested. But of course, there was always the chance of one flying right into your hand. At one and the same time, *Blowin’ in the Wind* was a song of despair and a song of hope.

The bittersweet message of the lyrics aside, the tune, the melody of *No More Auction Block*, an African American Spiritual originally sung by former slaves living in Canada, was so pleasant, so endearing, so memorable, *Blowin’ in the Wind* took on a life of its own. When it was released as a single, it sold 300,000 copies in the first week. In 1994, it was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame; in 2004 *Rolling Stone* magazine ranked it as fourteenth in its list of 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.

For people of faith, *Blowin’ in the Wind* made a couple of biblical connections: the lines about blind eyes and deaf ears are straight from Ezekiel. “The word of the Lord came to me,” writes the prophet: “Mortal, you are living in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see but do not see, who have ears to hear but do not hear.” And the reference to answers blowing in the wind is an easy connection with Jesus’ teaching in today’s Gospel concerning the Spirit of God: “the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” The answers, the papers blowing through the streets and alleys of New York, the Spirit of God – all are blowin’ in the wind. We have work to do, Bob Dylan tells us in *Blowin’ in the Wind*, to chase down and then hang onto those answers.

You have work to do, Jesus tells Nicodemus and us in today’s Gospel. Knowing and understanding God is not as achievable as keeping the Ten Commandments, showing up for worship on Sunday, and putting your money on the offering plate. It’s about listening for God’s call in Jesus, God’s call in the gospel, to use our eyes for seeing injustice and to open our ears for hearing our neighbours who are crying because of hunger and homelessness and poverty which, in this community, we allow our municipal, provincial, and federal leaders to ignore. Poverty and homelessness is not a plank in anyone’s election platform, because we, those who go to the polls on October 27 to elect municipal and regional representatives, and probably again sometime over the summer or fall to elect a provincial government, have not put it there. We love to criticize our politicians, but in a democracy, we have a say every four years or so. The winds of the gospel are blowing through the church, and the temptation is to be like Nicodemus and keep the doors closed and the windows shuttered. People of faith can set the public agenda by embodying the gospel, by writing letters, by asking troubling questions, by reminding the citizens of our smart and affluent city about the elephant in the room – but we need to be born a second time – this time of the Spirit, or come November 1, it will be same-old, same-old:

- Four or five thousand of our neighbours waiting for housing they can afford;
- a Thanksgiving Food Drive because the minimum wage and welfare and disability and Old Age pensions are so low that people have to choose between shelter and food;
- Out of the Cold beginning another record year, because people have no place to call home.

Nicodemus was fixed; he was well-educated, he probably sat on the Sanhedrin Council, the same committee that sometime later would suggest to the Romans that Jesus would lead an insurrection. But perhaps the Spirit blew into the Temple one day and disturbed his thoughts and feelings; and so he goes to Jesus in the hope of alleviating his *ennui*. And Jesus, perhaps not as much for Nicodemus's benefit as for ours – those who would later hear his story – counsels him to become uncomfortable, to welcome his questions, to break rank with the *status quo* and let the wild, chaotic, disturbing Spirit of God have its way with him.

The passage is poorly edited. We almost miss the ending because John wants to tie up a loose end from two chapters earlier concerning Jesus' divinity and the salvation he brings for those who fear death. We almost gloss over Jesus saying to Nicodemus, "...You do not receive our testimony" – by which he means Nicodemus does not acknowledge Jesus' authority; or recognize Jesus' proclamation of God's activity and presence in the world; or make room for Jesus' proclamation of God's radical love that levels every hierarchy and reduces to rubble every institution. Nicodemus loves hierarchy. Nicodemus has a chair at the table in the institution, the temple in Jerusalem. He's the first-century equivalent to a member of Canada's present Upper Chamber.

It is so easy to be Nicodemus. It is so easy *for me* to be Nicodemus and not write that letter to the editor of the Waterloo Region Record, not begin a conversation with the Council of Churches about using our influence to get affordable housing and dignity for those who are poor solved by our politicians. It is so easy for me to close the door and shutter the windows of my soul and stay living in the flesh (to use Jesus' metaphor for existential living).

I must tell you I struggle with John's gospel. He is so concerned to develop a distinct and unique voice in the early Christian community, a churchly voice I've come to realize, that Jesus the man is often lost in the dust of John's theological constructs of Jesus the divine One. And so, as I mention earlier, I'm not really sure that the references to eternal life in this passage we read today are all that helpful in our understanding of what is trying to be born anew through Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. But John 3:17 holds more hope, more purpose, and more clarity for me than John 3:16. John writes, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Jesus does not condemn Nicodemus. Jesus desperately wants Nicodemus to become his disciple: he's halfway there by having broken rank with the other Pharisees and coming to talk with Jesus privately. Jesus has a vision for Nicodemus going all the way; becoming filled with the gospel, using his power and influence for change. The religious establishment in Jerusalem during Jesus' time had virtually packaged the faith in shrinkwrap. Jesus imagined Nicodemus unwrapping it and rediscovering its integrity. Through Jesus, the world – not the temple, not the church, but *the world*, can be saved, we hear in John 3:17. Through Jesus, through the gospel, we have the answers for poverty and hunger and homelessness and war and greed and racism and nationalism and fear and anger, and hate. The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind – and the wind, for people of faith, is nothing less than the Spirit of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.