



**Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church**  
*Connecting faith with everyday life*

Sermon Archives

Date: March 12, 2017

Title: "2020 Vision, Part One: Aqua Church"

Scripture: John 3: 1-17

Description: We've moved from a solid world in which things were structured and ordered into liquid world in which things are more fluid. In this transition, Christ calls us to get out of the boat and walk on water. To do this well, we need to discard our anchors.

The phone rang just before midnight. For some of you, that's early evening; for me it's the middle of the night. However you define "middle of the night," when the phone rings then, you know it isn't good. "Dr. Fry? I'm the head nurse at Northside Hospital Neo-natal Intensive Care. We have a child born a couple hours ago who will not survive the night. The parents would like for the child to be baptized and asked us to call you. Can you come right away?"

Middle of the night phone calls are never good. Neither are late night knocks on the door. The neighbors have locked themselves out of their house. Somebody has an unidentified dog scratching on their door. Nicodemus has an urgent need to talk about spiritual things.

I can understand that. I've been there in the middle of the night, have you? I didn't go knocking on anybody's door, but I've lain awake in the dark troubled by what's going on lately and how am I going to deal with it. "It'll wait until morning," I tell myself. By that I mean, "In the morning I can get busy enough to bury whatever's bothering me under a pile of things to do."

Nicodemus didn't wait until morning. And he found Jesus, sitting on his deck, troubled about what had been going on lately and how to deal with it. So they talked. Jesus didn't offer any clear analysis, any simple strategies, or even any passages from scripture that revealed this was all part of God's prophecy. Instead, Jesus talked in riddles. About how the wind blows, how people get born at all ages, how the spirit and the world weave together. It was not what Nicodemus wanted to hear, though he

couldn't make himself stop listening, stop asking, stop being drawn towards the beauty and the truth of what this new teacher was saying.

Spoiler alert. If you continue to listen, you may realize that you are Nicodemus. Separated by 2,000 years, yet troubled by the same issues. And you may find that both Nicodemus and you have come to the right place. Actually, come to the right person.

Nicodemus was solid, thriving in a solid-ground world. A respected intellectual, living in a well-ordered, highly structured system, he knew how to work that system. The system no longer worked all that well, but he'd found ways to cope with the restlessness, the nagging concerns, the sleepless nights. He had the scriptures, the Law and the Prophets; he had the temple-thing going, with all its traditions and protocol and respectability. As long as no one recognized that all those things weren't working very well any more.

When Jesus started talking about water, and about wind, and about grown men being born like infants, Nicodemus recognized that his rock-solid world had become an Aqua Age. Instead of offering well-conceived plans and programs, Jesus sounded all liquid. This was not good. Wait: it was not comfortable, but it was very, very good. That's why Nicodemus couldn't stop listening.

Please, don't you stop listening either. Our world is changing, becoming a liquid world. I want you to thrive in that world, and that's what Jesus is offering here. Notice I said "thrive", not just "survive." I don't want Pleasant Hill Church, or you, or me to simply stay afloat. If our world turns to water, I want us to grab a surfboard and hang ten.

In the old days, water meant chaos. Think Noah surviving the flood, Moses crossing the Red Sea. Was there water in the story? Then people were in danger. Yet Jesus related to water in a positive way. Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine. Think the waters of baptism. In the heavenly vision, a river runs through the middle of the city.

Jesus was a master at calling people to think outside the lines, at getting people to climb outside the boat. We don't have to walk through life stubbing our toes or kicking up dust. Jesus calls us to walk on water. There may not be a path out there on the water, but we don't need a path. Let's blaze a trail. Let's not just stay afloat; let's grab a board and hang ten.

Well-worn paths have a way of becoming ruts. There are "rut stories" and "river stories." Let's live a river story. Rut stories keep us stuck in old tracks and trajectories.

They limit us and lock us in place. Eventually they fall apart. Several world-wide rut stories have collapsed in my lifetime: the rut story that dark-skinned people are innately inferior, that women are less capable than men. In my lifetime, a full one-fifth of the world's population lived under the story that communism was the wave of the future. We saw that rut story gasp its final breath right before our eyes.

River stories move us forward. They add life-giving nourishment. In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus pictured a river-story relationship with God. It's about Spirit and wind and life-giving birth. It's so far from a concrete drainage ditch, whose purpose is to contain and control.

You and I and Pleasant Hill church are entering a river story. After thirty-two years, this church is going to get a new pastor. Some of you have said, "Congratulations on your retirement, but I don't know what this church will be like without you." I appreciate your well-wishes, but you and I are in the same boat: I don't know what my life will be without you. Who am I, if I am not the pastor of Pleasant Hill Church? Will there be any Dave Fry without that role? I'm excited about retiring, but at the same time, I'm scared. Are you also a little bit anxious?

I keep hearing Jesus call us both to get out of the boat and walk on some water. Our world, our society, our nation have become fluid and we have an opportunity to do some surfing on some incredible waves.

If we're about to go rafting on the Ocoee, let's not reserve a seat on a paddleboat!

The leaders of this church, your elders, are aware that we are going to have to take a leap of some kind. Cruise control is not going to take us into the future. Physiologists describe walking as controlled falling. Parents are wise to make a big deal about a child's first steps. A baby's first step is a huge risk, and it changes everything. With those steps, a child is no longer a baby, but has become a toddler. After that, as every parent knows, hang on to your hats!

Let's go back to the boat picture and the challenge of walking on water. Our leadership, preparing for that challenge, is aware that we are attached to an anchor. When you need to walk on water, dragging an anchor is a problem.

Pleasant Hill Church's anchor is our debt. We are paying \$130,000 a year on our mortgage. The mortgage itself was a good idea. In fact, borrowing money for our first building was itself a step of faith, one that gave this church a home and an identity. "The group of people worshipping in a theater" was an adventure, but it was always

going to remain a group of people. Owning our first building was a huge, and wise, step, even if the bank owned most of it.

We reaffirmed that decision four times over the next thirty years, each time adding to our facilities and our ministries. (Look at the things going on here, and try to imagine these things happening if all we had was a movie theater on Sunday mornings.) As a result, Pleasant Hill Church has been in debt for thirty years.

Now, in our new, aqua world, that debt is holding us back. We have to nickel and dime our ministries, cutting back on Fellowship opportunities, watching every penny of education programs while we shovel tons of money towards our debt. We pay \$130,000 a year to support our bank, money that could support homeless people in our community, youth who want to participate in a mission trip, single moms who simply want clean clothes for their children.

Our leaders want to change that. Our elders crave that money to use for ministries, for programs and events that build our own faith and that elevate the lives of our neighbors. The session meets tonight, with the hope of describing that change to you next Sunday. As part of my legacy, I long to end my ministry here with Pleasant Hill a debt-free church.

As I said, cruise control will not take us into the future God has for us. We must begin by changing one word (“inaction”) into two words. Let’s climb out of the boat and begin walking towards the Christ who calls us. Amen.