

Nick at night. One wonders if the network Nickelodeon was playing off the name of the Pharisee in this morning’s lesson; for indeed Nicodemus, who could be nicknamed Nick, did come to Jesus at night.

In the lectionary, today’s lesson is for the second Sunday in Lent, and when I saw Jean Risley was not using it, I decided to include Nicodemus as one of three people with whom Jesus had encounters at whom we would look during our Lenten journey to Jerusalem. The visit of Nicodemus precedes the lessons of the past two Sundays when we heard of a Samaritan woman Jesus met at a well at high noon, and then a man born blind who was given his sight. If done in order, John’s Gospel moves from the dead of night – Nicodemus – takes us to the heat of day – the Samaritan woman – and then back to a different darkness with a man who cannot see.

Deeper imagery accompanies each account, as when Jesus can ask the woman for a drink of water and also invite her to consider his living water; and when confronted about healing on the Sabbath, Jesus poses the possibility it is the leaders who control religion who may truly be blind. Yet, preceding living water and truly seeing, one of those religious leaders made a midnight run to visit Jesus. Under the cover and safety of darkness Nicodemus comes on his own, and while John does not give him many words, he prompts Jesus to speak a very familiar phrase, “born again,” though in our reading it is translated,

++ “born from above.”

Born again. I suspect many of us have some reaction to those two words. It may have been used in a probing question asked of us, or perhaps we have done the asking, “Have you been born again?” As one writer suggests, the question can be to determine, “Are you saved like us?” or “Are you crazy like them?” [Florence, Anna Carter, in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), p. 71]

Even good faith words can be divisive when we used as litmus tests to determine if someone is in or out based on our certainties. Anna Florence Carter suggests John 3:16 creates its own kind of divisiveness, not in Jesus’ actual words, but how the signs and t-shirts, upon which are written only “John 3:16,” can seem so in your face as to give the feeling one must take sides – are you with Jesus or not? Using imagery of cleaning out a barn, Florence suggests that for both the term “born again” and the citation “John 3:16,” it would be helpful to “muck out the stalls; [and] name the stereotypes and bad press this passage can evoke, so there is room to hear the images afresh.” [ibid.]

So, let us seek to hear our passage afresh, knowing a Pharisee was taking a risk being caught with Jesus; and, while it would be so easy to belittle Nicodemus for coming alone, at night, to visit Jesus, we might consider how brave and forthright we would have been given the same situation. Nicodemus’ life was secure. He needn’t visit Jesus, but as Walter Brueggemann writes on the bulletin cover, he sensed there was something more.

Nick at night in John 3:1-17:

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night, and they spoke together. Nicodemus began, saying to Jesus,

‘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.’

‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’

‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’

‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” 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. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’

‘How can these things be?’

‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’

‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.’

‘For 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.’

‘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.’

A week ago, our daughter, son-in-law, and grandson came over for the afternoon. We had anticipated being outside to play in the lingering snow, but rain kept our activities indoors. A set of Legos was brought out. With his parents settled on the couch, Lynn and I sat on the floor with our grandson, clicking together freelance configurations. I formed what I called a bi-plane, though with our grandson having claimed all the wheels, it was more a glider. Then came the demand. “You need to put a weapon on your plane.”

“Why?” asked the 1960’s liberal grandfather. “So we can play,” replied his no compromise grandson. He had created a vehicle with a gun and needed an opponent. I internally cringed and sought, in vain, to reason with a 5-3/4 year old. “I would prefer not to.” And then, “It would make my plane unbalanced.” He insisted. That evening our daughter sent an email in which she wrote, “We enjoyed watching Micah play, and boss you around.”

Whether it is a child’s certainty is a Lego bi-plane should be weaponized, or a learned teacher’s belief it is impossible to be born again, I find our lesson inviting us to consider when and where and how our certainties create limits.

John did not need to list Nicodemus' credentials or degrees. Jesus recognized him as a teacher of the law. He also knew why he came at night, for it was a time when a person's loyalty to Jesus would put one out of the synagogue; and for a Pharisee, that would mean the unemployment rolls. As Walter Bruggemann writes, "It was a huge public relations risk to make the nighttime venture. I suspect that Nicodemus – lawyer, scholar, politician, CEO, whatever he was – had a gnawing concern that made him climb into his limousine and seek out Jesus." [Brueggemann, Walter, A Way Other Than Our Own, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017) p. 34]

I was taken with the adjective "gnawing" used of Nicodemus. It caused me to ponder how I have preached of Nicodemus' cowardice at visiting Jesus under the cover of night. With this sense of his gnawing inquiry, I find myself letting go of my condemnation or scapegoating of this seeker, and focusing more on darkness as symbolic of the blinders that seem to keep the learned Nicodemus from understanding Jesus' words.

Even while asking questions, Nicodemus speaks with certainty. I think of people who come directly to us saying, "No wishy washy talk, just give me a simple, straightforward, rational answer." Some are close talkers, coming right up to our faces, either as a show of power or a sign of insecurity – and we soon recognize power and insecurity can be closely linked. What I have discovered is "tell it like it is" people may not really want to "be told how it truly is." So, even while sympathetic to Nicodemus' gnawing search, I find the Pharisee closed to Jesus' answers.

As biblical scholar Frances Taylor Gench suggests, "Religious people may find a special kinship with [Nicodemus.] He is a respected, educated theologian, well-schooled in religious matters, and part of his problem may be that his imagination is limited by his certitudes about what is and what is not possibility with respect to the things of God." [Gench, Frances Taylor, Encounters With Jesus, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 25]

His imagination is limited by his certitudes. What we know can confine us and prevent us from embracing the mysteries of the life of the Spirit, and God's own possibilities for us, missing invitations to move from night to day, from womb safety to new birth. It is not only individuals who can be bound by certitude. The church itself can be so protective of itself that it sets boundaries of exclusion by clinging to the limits of its certainty. This can include worship style or who can be a member, or be ordained, or be married. At the last presbytery meeting, an elder was commissioned to serve Communion at Common Cathedral, which is not a cathedral at all, but it holds worship every Sunday afternoon on Boston Common, with many homeless people attending. There are no credentials required, creeds to confess, or membership rolls to keep; one is a member by expressing a desire to follow Jesus, and receive a cross to wear. So, when walking down a Boston street, if you see someone wearing one of the crosses, there is a link, a bond, a fellowship.

This morning we will celebrate Communion, one of two sacraments we believe Jesus commissioned us to do in his name, to remember him in breaking bread. Is Communion a meal? Yes, though the fare will not bring physical fullness. Is it just a meal? No, and therein lies the mystery, not so much whether bread becomes body and wine become blood, but what happens when we let sacramental mystery have a home. The mystery of Communion could symbolize giving up certainty for Lent, or for life.

Jesus had recognized it was time for Nicodemus to leave the security and warmth of the womb of his Pharisee life. With all his knowledge, Nicodemus could not see past the concept of being born again as physically impossible.

As retirement approaches for me, there are many things to be sure are in place – income and medical insurance for sure, and also planning for physical, emotional and spiritual health as one enters a new phase of life. In such life planning, I like to plan things out, to have things be settled, to have everything in place, ready to go, stacked in neat piles. Imagine a table with many stacks of papers, all in order. Then imagine someone deciding the room needs some air on a windy day, and then opening the window near that table. That’s what Jesus is doing to Nicodemus, opening the window, presenting the blowing Spirit, offering the birth canal of new life for the Pharisee.

“For God so loved the world that God sent the only son, so all who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life.” That is the John 3:16 offer to Nicodemus, but it is critical to understand in John’s Gospel eternal life is a here and now opportunity, not a there and then future home. Nicodemus, you can know new life now.

I believe our lesson tells us to put a heavy rock on those stacks of required forms on the table, but keep other plans open to the blowing of the wind, the moving of the Spirit, the new births into which God may be inviting us. As Walter Brueggemann suggests, doing so will help us “honor the gnaw in [our] life.” [Brueggemann, *op. cit.*, p. 35]

After our grandson departed last week, I thought about how I might have asked, “I wonder what the world would be like if there were no weapons?” fully understanding he was, at that moment, seeking a time of play not a lesson in philosophy. Yet, within the question is the word wonder, and wonder can be a casualty of too much certainty of what is or should be. Wonder can rebirth our staid acquiescence to antiquated notions of what is normal in terms of our safety and security. Wonder can prompt us to ask, “What would Jesus have us say about that?” Wonder allows us to continually be reborn with the acts and love of Christ on our minds and lips. Wonder allows us to abandon our certainties when they hinder God’s creativities.

Those who have approached retirement may not be asked, “Will you do supply preaching?” but you likely have heard, “What are your plans for retirement?” I can recite my plans, my lists, but I could also glibly answer, “God only knows.” Now, theologically, I don’t happen to believe God has my calendar set in a master plan, but I do believe God will place before me opportunities, and some of those will prompt my gnawings for something new.

I hope I will pay attention to such gnawings of the Spirit, honor the gnaw in my retired life. I hope I can be open to those God opportunities that challenge me to leave behind the beloved security of my certainty. I hope I will be attune to listen and learn and be moved by the Spirit. Still, I do hope it does not involve weaponized Legos.