

Genesis 12:1-4a ~ John 3:1-17
Encountering Jesus: The Pharisee Named Nicodemus
March 8, 2020 ~ Second Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to today's Scripture and four-Sunday sermon series:

Today we are taking a big leap. Last week we were in the hot, sunny landscape of Matthew's desert with Jesus after 40 days in the wilderness, where he had been led by the Spirit right after his baptism in the river Jordan. This morning, and for the rest of March, we are jumping from the narrative world of Matthew to the Gospel of John. Our fourth and latest gospel, written around 85-95 CE. While that was only about 20 or 30 years later after the other 3 gospels were written, the distance in style and perspective makes it seem longer, if not a world away because of what happened in 70 CE. That was the year that Rome destroyed Jerusalem and the Second Temple. Digging their way out of the ashes and the rubble, the Gospel of John was written by and for the Johannine Community, one of the very first groups of Christ-followers trying to figure out how to be a church. It is helpful to realize these stories and this gospel were written from the deep darkness of a community that had been shaken down to the bone marrow of their souls.

From this darkness arises big questions. As a whole book, John continually interweaves the story of Jesus and the story of the community that believed in him. In both today's encounter with Nicodemus, and next week's encounter with the Samaritan woman, you will hear this interplay hidden between the lines of these stories, where the Johannine Community is trying to distinguish who they are in the redefining light of Christ, "We are no longer this, but this." Their understanding of gender, race, privilege, culture, religious identity was giving way to something new. Sound familiar?

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. Right: night doesn't just tell us what time he appeared. Night here means darkness, confusion, secrecy. You may be rolling your eyes (inwardly) thinking come on—can't night just be night? No if you want to receive the full gift of John's gospel. Instead, what we get long stories layered with symbols. Words with double meanings where things are always more than they appear at first glance. This kind of story can be frustrating and disorienting. It was for Nicodemus, and he was a professional religious leader. Listen for the way he tries to take refuge in the literal.

I pray you take the leap into this extreme adventure as we navigate through the dense forest of John's narrative world. As we stand at the trailhead of this Lenten series of stories in John, here's my invitation written by Elizabeth Penny Randall, an Episcopalian priest: "Lent is not about picking a discipline and doing it right. It's about looking closely at what God offers; it's about looking closely at our response. It's about asking for the grace to move out of the darkness, to get off the doorsill and come into the light. It's about listening for the wind."ⁱ

Sermon:

I went away last night more confused, than when I went in. Me, Nicodemus, the answer man. Listening to Jesus made me feel things I've never felt—or let myself feel—before. You see, I am a Pharisee. And a very good one, too, I might add. Not all of us are quite what we're cracked up to be. But I do a pretty good job. I play by the rules. And people respect me for it. It's not that easy to be a good Pharisee. I fast twice a week. In fact, I was fasting last night when I went to see Jesus... Maybe that was it. Maybe it was my empty stomach and light-headedness. I just didn't feel at all myself when I was with him. I felt uncertain, uneasy, oddly nervous.

What he said, astonished me. I'm typically very good at covering up my feelings, but it was as though he could see right through me. It was as though he saw straight through my pretense and into my soul, when he asked, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

To everyone else in the world, I am the answer man. I have studied the law, meditated on it day and night. I understand the law. We have a law for every situation. In that law I am confident. Nothing throws me. I've got it all figured out. People who are confused, come to me.

But then, out of nowhere comes this man. Who is he? That's what I went to find out. He had performed so many signs that I was convinced he was a man of God, a man from God. I'd heard the rumors about the wine in Cana that he'd made out of water. And people were still talking about the scene in the temple during the Passover. I wish I'd been there to see it myself. He made some preposterous claim about destroying the Temple and raising it in three days.

I could have arrested him right there for making that threat to destroy the Temple, but he is starting to attract quite a following. He seems like more than a Rabbi, but what is he? I wanted to know. I wanted to figure it out myself, before any of the other Pharisees. Being a Pharisee isn't enough. I need to be the best Pharisee.

And to be honest with you... Maybe I wanted to learn his secret. We all have them, don't we? We have angles, ways around the stuff we can't or don't want to deal with. I wanted to find out what his angle was. So, I figured I'd go talk to him man-to-man. I'd go at night. That way no one would see me. I'd approach him teacher to teacher, established leader to the up-and-coming leader, maybe I could mentor him, help him connect with the power players in Jerusalem. If I gave him some inside intel, he might let down a little. Maybe even tell me his secret. But it didn't go that way at all.

Before I knew it, he threw me off my game. I didn't like that. I don't like being caught off guard. Nobody does that to Nicodemus. Especially not some upstart from Nazareth. He threw me off when he started talking about being born from above. Or born of Spirit, as he put it. What does that mean?

We are born Jews. That's how we become chosen people, the children of the promise who were given laws to follow in grateful response. Some do and some don't. I am someone who does and it is my business to make sure other people do. But Jesus was talking about something else altogether. I couldn't make sense of it, really. He kept saying words like everyone and anyone. Since when did we see everyone the same way? Since when did everyone have the inborn potential for eternal life? It almost seemed like eternal life was something we could experience while we are still living, here and now. Something that starts not with our physical birth, but with a spiritual birth or rebirthing? I had never thought of birth that way before. I was confused. Disoriented.

I started to wonder if we were talking about the same God. But then he brought up that story about Moses leading our people in the wilderness and what happened with the serpent. Here was the situation: Those poisonous creeping, slithering reptiles were biting and killing our people and so God had Moses make a bronze serpent, set it up on a pole so when someone got bit by a serpent, all they would have to do is look at the bronze serpent and live. A snake to cure a snake bite, that always seemed odd. But Jesus was using that story as midrash to explain about himself-- "the Son of Man" being lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness? The Son of Man, to cure us, to heal us.

Then I started to see where Jesus was going with this. Jesus was claiming to be the Son of Man. The Messiah! Born into our darkness? Then to be "lifted up" on a pole like the serpent? That was too much for me. I had to bolt. I was losing it. Of course, I kept my cool on the outside. Nodded my head. Stopped talking, in case he would trip me up again and slipped away under the cover of night.

But my mind has been racing, ever since. I couldn't sleep. What kind of God would become a human being? And someone so common, so ordinary, so small town. Sure, we are commanded to love God with all our heart, and soul, and strength. But what kind of love would make God, our earth-creating, red-sea splitting, manna from heaven making, water from the rock breaking God, decide to become one of us? What kind of love is that?

Fast forward to 2020 here in Marshfield, WI. Over 2000 years later and on the other side of the globe. I'm here to testify to this kind of love, we're still astonished by. It's a love that invites, invokes, involves. It's a love that calls for action, a catalyst for change. As Jesus proclaimed: it's about what we do. In v. 21 he says that "Those who do what is true, come to the light." Belief begets, belief births action. Again and again.

According to the Gospel of John, the only gospel where Nicodemus is mentioned, he makes his way slowly to the light. In chapter 7, Nicodemus suggests to his peers that Jesus be given a hearing before they arrest him. He had become a hidden follower at that point. But not until after Jesus has been crucified, in John 19 (38-42), does Nicodemus come out of the shadows to assist Joseph of Arimathea in the preparing of Jesus body for burial, and publicly proclaim his belief in him.

What about us? How long will we resist the transforming power of Jesus, playing it safe, dancing on the edges of full-throttle faith-led living. Are you being called to take the next step into a deeper walk with Jesus? A step that might call us to change the way we look at others, the world and ourselves?

Our first lesson, the ancient story of the call of Abram in Genesis 12, the man whom we identify as the father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, this icon of faith, was 75 the day he heard this call. The narrative is sparse. Abram says nothing in this story. God called; Abram went. However, he did not follow God's instructions completely. God told him to leave his family, and yet he did not. Abram took Sarai and his nephew Lot, along with other extended family members, kindred, and livestock. This gives me hope. And so does the story of Nicodemus' slow evolution into belief.

If you hear these stories and think, I'm too old to be issued a call in a new direction. If you hear these stories and think, I couldn't possibly do all that God is commanding me. Think of Abram, who became Abraham, whose lineage did become stars so numerous that here we sit worshipping in this sanctuary in Marshfield. Thank you, Abram. If you think I kind of get it, but still have so many questions. Think of Nicodemus. Thank you, Nicodemus. Thank you, God.

I hear an invitation and a call to let the Wind and Breath of the Holy Spirit lead us to reshape the world into a land where we give people room to be themselves; a land where we don't have to have all the answers, because we know the one who does and that is enough; a land ruled by love of neighbor: the promised land of grace and mercy. This is the primary meaning of "eternal life" in John's Gospel. Heaven on earth shining through.

Before I wrap this up, I need to address that 4-word question that someone may have asked you somewhere along the way: "Are you born again?" Yes, it comes from this story. Truthfully and sadly, as Professor and author Anna Carter Florence has pointed out, this question has become code language for one of two questions, when we hear someone say "Are you born again" it is actually code for either: "Are you saved, like us?" Or, "Are you crazy, like them?" Whichever camp we may find ourselves, we're totally missing the point that Jesus was making with Nicodemus. He was describing to Nicodemus the Spirit-Driven uncertainty of wind (or spirit, it's the same word in Greek) that blows where it chooses, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. He was teaching Nicodemus about a faith that comes from God alone, and resists the

labels and categorizations that lead to judgment about who's in and who's out. That kind of thinking is an example of the darkness that hinders the free flow of the Holy Spirit.

God so loved and loves this world enough to enter it as one of us. Enough to become a human being who got thirsty and tired, who wept bitterly, who cried out his sense of abandonment and desolation as he hung on the cross, lifted up. If you are feeling alone or lost, discouraged or depressed, if you barely made it here this morning and are wondering how you will make it through the rest of this day. I have good news for you: Jesus is with us, especially in our darkness, ready to take our hand, to lead us into a new life, a new lease on life, a new way of looking at our life. Again, and again, no matter how many times it takes.

ⁱ Elizabeth Penny Randall, in *The Abingdon Women's Preaching Annual, Series 2, Year A*, edited by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2001), p. 81.