

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent (Year C)

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*John 3:1-17*

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, '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.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, '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.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, '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.*

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Ahhhh, Nicodemus. If there was ever a character in the Bible to whom we'd like to say, "Oh, bless your heart," it's Nicodemus. No, Nick, of course you can't enter again into your mother's womb; that's *obviously* not what Jesus is getting at!

And so, we'll have ourselves a little chuckle at Nick's expense. We appreciate the comic relief in an otherwise rather esoteric chapter of John's Gospel, one that blends the literal with the metaphoric.

And yet, we would do wise to cut Nicodemus a little slack. Because, if we are to be truth-tellers, then we must admit that there's little bit of Nicodemus in each of us. Each of us has questions that we'd prefer to ask Jesus under the cover of darkness rather than during the day when everyone can laugh at us for asking them. Each of us has curiosities that we'd rather not be public information. Each of us has a bit of "Nick at Night" within us, wishing to interrogate Jesus under the safety of anonymity. It is under such circumstances that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night.

Whenever I think of this passage, I can't help but think of one of my favorite chapters in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, "Riddles in the Dark." It's the part of the book where Bilbo Baggins encounters the creature Gollum deep in the caves below the goblin city. Hopelessly lost, Bilbo's only chance of escaping is by winning a contest of riddles with Gollum so that the creature has to show him the way out. Now, the metaphor is not perfect, I'll admit. But the drama, the darkness, and the riddles all remind me of this chapter of John's gospel.

The heart of today's passage seems to be the game of riddles that Jesus plays with Nicodemus. Nicodemus is no fool when it comes to theological literacy. He is, after all, a religious leader and a Pharisee. We know that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the "board of directors" for the Jewish theologians. We can assume that Nicodemus was well-versed in scripture and no stranger to theological conversations such as the one in today's passage.

And, yet, Nicodemus seems to struggle with the conversation. As best I can tell, the reason for his struggle is this: Jesus is inviting him into the metaphorical and the mystical and Nicodemus seems stuck in the literal. Jesus tells him that in order to "see the kingdom" that one must be "born from above."

Now, we need to define some terms here before we go any further. When Jesus is talking about "seeing the Kingdom," he's not referring to having some secret knowledge or saying some magic words to assure that you go to heaven when you die. "Seeing the Kingdom" is about recognizing what God is doing in the world and then participating joyfully and faithfully in that work. And in order to do that, Jesus says, one must be born from above.

Nicodemus wonders how that is possible. No one can enter his mother's womb again! To answer his bewilderment, Jesus brings up three mysterious elements, water, Spirit, and wind. One must be born of water and Spirit. One must understand that the wind moves as it wishes and is a powerful force; even though we can't see it, we can certainly see its effects.

You see, Nicodemus came to this discussion under the cover of darkness to do one thing: to get answers. Only he doesn't seem to receive the answers he was expecting. Some of us want concrete, simple answers. And sometimes the church can be a place to hear such answers. For example, God is love. Therefore, Racism is wrong. Killing is evil. And violence is not the way of the Kingdom.

But faith is about more than simple answers. In fact, faith is more about the right questions than the right answers. "Out there" in the world, especially in this season of political campaigns, there is no shortage of people who are claiming that they have all the answers. Answers to health care, answers to the economy, answers to how to heal the painful divide in our nation.

Some people expect to come to Church to receive the answers; the answers to life's deepest questions. And sometimes I'm worried that when they come to worship with that expectation that they are setting themselves up for a great disappointment. Because today's passage reminds us that Jesus doesn't always answer questions directly or simply. Jesus pushes us deeper than that and encourages us to *ask the right questions*.

What if *that* were instead the reputation of the Church? What if we were known not as the place to consume easy answers but a safe space to ask difficult questions?

It reminds me of the following quote from the Eastern Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware: “We see that it is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers to every question, but to make us progressively aware of a mystery. God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder.”

I think it’s very important to have a safe space to ask deep questions even if the answers don’t appear right away or in the form in which we expect them. For me, therapy is a place for me to experience this. Many of you know that part of my weekly routine is meeting with my therapist, Jenny. Lately, I’ve been asking a lot of questions in that space; most of them having to do with my impending parenthood. Will I be a good father? What is my daughter going to be like? Will she have my musicality or her mother’s patience, or (hopefully) both? Will I ever sleep again? How are we going to fit all this stuff in our house? What if Hazel Grace doesn’t like me? What if our dog never forgives us for bringing another being into our home? What if I drop Hazel Grace, will she bounce? What if we feed her something that’s not organic or cage-free? Will she immediately die? What if? How? When? What?

Sometime, my therapist will just look at me, laugh, and say to me playfully, “I don’t know what you want from me.” And I’ll respond, sometimes with laughter and sometimes with tears, that I just want a safe place to wonder. A place where I can be me and a place where its ok to doubt, to fear, to anticipate, to hope, to live in the tension between my human desire to know everything and my limited capacity for knowing the future.

I hope that Nicodemus walked away from that conversation with Jesus knowing that he was welcomed to wonder. I hope he understood that part of being engaged in theological conversations was walking away without all the answers. I hope Nicodemus appreciated that an important part of being in conversation with God is to *surrender*; to surrender to the mystery, to surrender to the wonder, to surrender to the wild movements of water, Spirit, and wind.

I hope Nicodemus walked away from this conversation disoriented. Because that’s what the wilderness does to us; it disorients us. It disorients us because it’s a place of mystery and the unknown. Wilderness disorients us because it feels a bit like walking in the dark. But disorientation itself is *not* a bad thing. For disorientation makes room for re-orientation; a re-orientation guided by those things that Jesus mentions to Nicodemus: water, Spirit, wind.

So friends, let us allow ourselves to have the curiosity of our friend Nicodemus. Let us not be afraid to speak riddles in the dark with our Savior who drives us into the wilderness of Lent. Let us understand that being “born again” is really nothing more than re-committing ourselves to the wonder, love, and mystery of the God who calls us beloved.

In the name of God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**