

Rev. Kimberly Glenn

In the name of our one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am a lover of mystery. It started with books about The Bobsey Twins, Miss Pickerell and Nancy Drew when I was a child. Then Agatha Christie's Miss Marple and Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca as a teenager. Then as an adult I have loved the many Travis McGee stories by John MacDonald and spies written about by Ken Follett and solving murder mysteries with PD James. And that's just to name a few.

With my passion for mystery is it any wonder that I would be led to a career that explores and embodies mystery? I'm talking, of course, about the mysterious but very real relationship between us and our God. It's the ultimate mystery, isn't it? It's the mystery we all yearn to solve, the mystery we are all drawn to in a way that is a challenge to articulate. This morning's gospel reading is an attempt to articulate the process of being in right relationship with God. Like much of scripture, the words used to describe that process help us to form an image in our minds using metaphor. The words are not factual or scientific or definitive. Instead they are creative and maybe a little bit mysterious.

The main characters in this morning's gospel are two rabbis. One is a Pharisee named Nicodemus. The other is the familiar star of the gospels, Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth. Like investigators in a good mystery, we ask who Nicodemus is and what he is up to in this passage. It turns out that there is not much written about Nicodemus. We can infer from what John's gospel tells us that he is a rabbi who is well respected among the Jewish priests in Israel. We are told that he took a stand against the Jewish Council called the Sanhedrin when they decided they wanted to arrest Jesus. Nicodemus argued that Jesus had not had a fair hearing to determine any guilt.

We know that Nicodemus believes, with some other Jewish priests, that Jesus is a teacher who has come from God; that they believe this because of the remarkable things he has managed to accomplish in his ministry - healing the deaf, lame and blind; feeding multitudes of people from scarce resources; and turning water into wine, for example. Nicodemus and the other Jewish priests had spent years learning the law and being trained in leading religious rites but Jesus' learning and abilities were different. And yet, Nicodemus and the others realized that Jesus' gifts for teaching and preaching and ministering to God's people were genuine; that his skills and gifts were God given.

What we don't know about Nicodemus, what the author of John's gospel does not tell us, is why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. The scripture says, "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." Those are just two words, by night, but they are there for a reason. What could that reason be?

If we think of the practicalities of coming by night, we think of not being able to clearly see, of stumbling and squinting to make our way; avoiding but barely missing obstacles. We think of having to heighten our other four senses to help us along the way. We listen more closely, we walk more slowly, we are alert to smells of things nearby. We look for clues to the way forward - a sign, a landmark, the location of the stars and the moon. We are making sure we stay on the right path to get where we are going. I imagine this was how Nicodemus made his way forward. Why would he go to the trouble?

I think he went to the trouble because he wanted to know for himself who Jesus was. The only way for him to find out was to come through the darkness, both literally and figuratively. I can relate to that. Are you able to relate to that, too? We are born with an innate yearning to connect. At first we connect with people, but then we come to a point where we yearn to connect with something deeper; something that transcends the human experience. We call the object of that yearning God; God who is the center of our being; God who is the ultimate source of our being.

Nicodemus came to Jesus hoping to understand the connection Jesus had with God and instead was met with a mystery. Jesus presented him with this riddle. He said, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." In other words, Jesus said no one can understand the reality of God and God's kingdom without seeing things from a completely new perspective. But Nicodemus didn't hear those words that way. He heard them literally; he had never thought to understand the world in any way but literally. Now Jesus was telling him there was more to see, more to understand, than was plainly obvious. God's kingdom, it seems, has more dimension than what can be seen with the human eye.

Twenty-five years ago, I was like Nicodemus. I had been a Christian from the day I was born but I really did not know Jesus, I really did not understand anything about the reality of God, especially the reality of God in Christ. But I was drawn to knowing, I yearned to make that connection. Then the opportunity presented itself for me to dig deeper, to learn more. I realize now that I was like Nicodemus venturing out in the dark, not knowing what might be in my path along the way; not knowing what I would find when I actually got to know Jesus.

Jesus went on to tell Nicodemus that what is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Jesus was tying his metaphor of birth together well. Let's think of being born as emerging into a new state of being; a new state of understanding, in this case, and living into that new understanding. Jesus is telling us to come away from the darkness, away from being stuck in a way of understanding life that keeps us bound to the material world. He is inviting us to turn away from the dark and embrace the light that can be found in the transcendent spirit of God; to take a leap of faith and trust that the spirit will lead and guide us to a kingdom of God existence; to a full life. That's what I chose to do. I chose to trust the spirit. Not all at once, but gradually over time. The process occurred within a community like this one here at St. John's. The community was key to my transformation. The community would be key to Nicodemus' transformation, too.

Nicodemus was stuck in the darkness of his old way of thinking of God as the judge who held out wrath as a weapon for those who failed to obey. Jesus revealed something about God that was different but was as real and alive as Jesus himself. Nicodemus was somehow drawn to discover that reality, and this was his first step. While he had tried and tried to fit Jesus into his old way of looking at the world, he was given this opportunity to instead look at the world in a new way and fit his old understanding into the new paradigm. The old way was all about controlling the outcome, or trying to. The new way was to trust that God's Holy Spirit could and would lead according to the mysterious freedom of God's will.

So this story is not really about Jesus or about Nicodemus but about the process that we must go through to find Jesus and to discover through Jesus the way

to live the life God intends for us to live. When we turn to face and receive God's spirit we are no longer in control of that process. God is in control. When we receive the Holy Spirit into ourselves, as we do when we receive the Eucharist at the Lord's table, the work that goes on inside us and emerges through us IS the work of God through Christ. The Bible is said to be the Greatest Story Ever Told. Our triune God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the holiest and greatest mystery ever to behold. May it ever be so.