

Sermon Lent II Year A 2017

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

Bill Watson

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Nicodemus showed great courage in coming to Jesus. He was a Pharisee, a Jewish leader, learned in the law, and a member of the Sanhedrin. What had drawn him must have been his amazement at what he had heard of Jesus. He needed answers to his questions. But if others in authority saw him approach Jesus, this would not be favorably received. For this reason, he had to come under cover of darkness. It was a clandestine meeting looking for answers.

I think we can identify with Nicodemus? Don't we wish we could approach Jesus for answers to our questions? I bet we also wish we had the opportunity. How many of us have cried, "Why is this happening to me?" or "to my child" or "Jesus if you love me show yourself." We would love to have our questions answered. Clearly, directly, plainly.

In some ways, we are clamoring for this as a society. Plain talk and clear answers are what we yearn for. Tell it like it is, no matter how harsh it sounds. That is what Nicodemus hoped as well.

And how did Jesus respond? "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Say what? What can that mean? Nicodemus is puzzled and asks, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?"

Nicodemus' question reminds me of the tongue in cheek bumper sticker. "I was born just fine the first time."

Then Jesus goes on, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."

Like Nicodemus, we may still be in the dark about the message that Jesus was conveying. For many, the difficulty begins with the phrase, kingdom of God, a figure of speech that some may find, off-putting. Kingdom sounds like power over, rather than power with. Such an understanding would fit with the hopes of the Hebrew people for a messiah who would mount a rebellion against the Roman

occupiers. Scholarly debate continues around this phrase as it relates to Jesus' self-understanding of his mission.

For some of Jesus' followers the very thought of Jesus encouraging such a kingdom is inconsistent with their Savior. So some rather than referring to the kingdom of God, use instead the word reign, the reign of God. This is perhaps more accurate. Jesus at points says that the reign of God is inaugurated with his coming and is a present reality. This is not some future state but rather a state that is already coming into being, that Jesus inaugurated, and which we have the opportunity to participate in.

Another area of unclarity may be his phrase, "Born of water and Spirit." What might that mean? This rebirth may come in baptism, but I don't think it is limited to this sacramental action alone. Rebirth may also come about through anointing or insight or perhaps through prayer when we say "help me Jesus" "I can't do this any longer." Or "Heal me Jesus." It comes in letting go of our grip. Opening ourselves to this higher power.

The in-breaking Spirit of God. Opening ourselves, allows God's love to break in. We call this grace. Openness to the divine love entering and manifesting that love through us. It is a letting go of all that can consume and possess us and instead turn our focus outward. Of letting go of some of our anxieties and extending ourselves to those around us.

Since the attacks of 9/11 our nation has been gripped by fear. So much appeals to us to create a safe environment. Secure our borders, our neighborhoods, our schools. This fear pulls us inward. Yet, in today's gospel, Jesus teaches something totally different, an incredibly risky concept. Rather than hunkering down, Jesus says we must open ourselves up instead.

There was plenty of fear in Jesus' day. The Roman authorities made sure of that. Fear was a way of controlling the people of Israel. And if this fear was not enough to keep people in line, practicing the Jewish faith had its own strict requirements. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus knew the religious law well. Jesus wasn't saying that the law has no place, but rather that human connection, dignity, and need have a priority over our security, our own well-being. The prophet Jeremiah had called Israel in exile to also be open. Open to settling down in exile, build houses, plant vineyards, marry and raise families. For in the land in which they were in exile was the source of their well-being. (Jeremiah 29). When the people prayed for deliverance, God answered calling them into connection and

relationship with those most different from themselves. The same may be occurring today. Rather than fearing difference, God encourages us to open ourselves to relationship.

Jesus is encouraging Nicodemus to look beyond the law. As Jesus himself had done in greeting all those he encountered on the way. As he was on the way to teach he was frequently stopped by those in need. In need of hope, of healing, of sustenance, and of new life. Something in his very nature wouldn't allow him to walk past without seeing. To ignore others was not in Jesus' nature.

For followers of Jesus, to be born from above is to have our eyes opened. To see ourselves in a new light. To see ourselves connected to this divine love and to be bearers of this divine love. Even as inadequate as we feel.

God's hope is that in seeing we would connect. This was the hope of God expressed by the prophet Micah, "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) Jesus showed us what God desires in his life and ministry. In the stories he told, in the people he encountered, in healing and feeding, in releasing from demons, and in his teaching.

This is so counter to our cultural conversation today so much so that it will take the presence and action of God's Spirit in our lives if we are to be successful. The temptation is to close our borders, limit our contacts, surround ourselves completely and impenetrably in an effort to maintain our security. But all such efforts have the unintended consequence of isolating us from one another. Alas, circling the wagons in ever smaller zones of supposed security yields only temporary ease before something else frightens or scares us. I don't believe that is God's hope. Jesus calls us forth to extend our hands in love, trusting as the Psalmist expressed it, "that our help is in the name of the Lord." (Psalm 121).

To be born from above is to be connected, filled to the brim with a love that overflows into the world around us. New eyes to see and connect with our neighbor. But also new eyes to be kinder to ourselves, less judgmental, more forgiving, just as God has forgiven us. Mercy is a quality that we need more than ever. We must be merciful to ourselves with all our foibles and limitations. And we must be merciful to others. Yet, forces would have us believe that mercy is weakness, that power is strength. Alas, such thinking is diametrically opposed to the calling to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Safety and security are false gods. As much as we wish that weren't true. Our allegiance to these false gods has nothing

to benefit us in the end. The danger is that it may cut us off from our neighbor, from God, and from ourselves. There is no life there. We don't live our lives in the secure zones of airports awaiting our flights. We live in the world, this world with all its risk. Jesus is calling us to let go of fear and rigidity and step out.

Brian McLaren in his recent book, *The Great Spiritual Migration* (New York: Convergent Books, 2016) speaks of the risks we must take. "The journey of salvation and liberation is long, the risks and dangers are many, and the costs are high. Anyone who is tempted to turn back in fear is free to do so," McLaren writes. "But if there are costs to change, there are also costs to resisting change. Both costs are worth counting."

To further illustrate his point, he refers to this classic quote from C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*: "It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And we cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad."

It seems the choice is ours, I pray that we will be open to the in-breaking reign of God, the grace and Spirit of God active in your life and mine; empowering us for the work God calls us to.

Nicodemus is changed over the course of John's gospel. So much so that at the crucifixion, he stepped out in faith carrying a weight of costly nard to anoint the body of Jesus. Abram stepped forth in faith and was blessed accordingly. I pray that we too empowered by the Spirit will step forth in faith responding to God's call in our lives.