

Sermon

Seeking: How Do We Begin Again?

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, March 5, 2023

Second Sunday in Lent

John 3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 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.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 4 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?” 5 Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8 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.” 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

John 3:11 “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. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

John 3:16 “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.

John 3:17 “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.

Gen. 12:1 Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”^a

4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

What questions are we asking in the dark?

† **Nicodemus who begins asking questions in the dark — joins Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus’ body for burial. It seems that whatever else being “born from above” means, it leads Nicodemus to the simple act of kindness which he does at personal risk in the wake of crucifixion.**

† **Lent as a training-ground for pilgrims:**

- * **Begins with a longing which leads us to leave “home” in order to facilitate not only travel in the world but departure on the “inner odyssey” of growing in love of God.**

What invitations to newness require a radical departure from the place and people who have shaped us?

† **Our calling is often to expand the horizon of our concerns from family, friends, and people like-us to the world which is in urgent need of God’s blessing.**

- I. I wonder what questions persist for you in the dark?**
 - A. do you rehearse old mistakes wondering “what if?”**
 - 1. My speech to become Pep Club President**
 - B. Do you worry about the future?**
 - 1. Some future job-prospect**

2. Or educational opportunity
- C. Maybe the questions that haunt your nights are about your worth...
 1. Both sons are in a season of life where it feels like their worth is constantly being measured by others and it can lead a person to wonder if you are worthy when it seems like others do not always see your value.
- D. Maybe the night is consumed by an examination of the wonderment “who am I?”
 1. Last week Pastor Kim helped us begin Lent by looking thoughtfully at Jesus in his post-baptismal wandering as he (with the devil’s help) sorted out who he was.

† He was, above all else, the “beloved.”

II. No doubt, our friend Nicodemus has lay awake at night navigating persistent questions like these.

- A. On the one hand, his identify was already established:

“...a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.”

- B. But Nicodemus must have intuited that he was more than that...there is a persistent, nagging, sense that there was more to know
 1. And so he comes to Jesus at night — presumably to seek counsel.
 2. Seemingly before he can pose a question he is derailed by Jesus’ comment about being born from above.

3. Because Nicodemus appears to still be in his “concrete operational” phase — he replies,
“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

4. Jesus responds that if he, a leader in the religious community, is still thinking literally about the mystery of God — that there is a problem
“Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

C. John’s story about Nicodemus suggests that the questions which arise in the night are worthy of our careful attention.

D. These nocturnal inquiries are described in the Bible too:

*Psa. 77:6 I commune (Heb = make music) with my heart in the night;
I meditate and search my spirit.*

III. Lent is the season for such wonderments

A. A season meant to point to the on-going journey of becoming the people we are born to be.

B. In that way it has been associated with the concept of “pilgrimage.”

1. We make our way in Lent — following the Lord we seek and keeping watch for the ways God will speak to us through the rumination of the heart.

C. Lent is when we consciously turn our attention to the hinge between our outer-life and our inner life.

1. **Pastor Kim reminded us to let Lent be a time of congruency between what we say and how we live.**
- D. **Nicodemus’ “secret” nighttime inquiry of Jesus may point to the need for us all to take seriously what William Inge called “an inner Odyssey with a secret history of its own.”**

William Ralph Inge (1860 to 1954)

“Every [person] has two journeys to make through life. There is the outer journey, with its various incidents and the milestones . . . There is also an inner journey, a spiritual Odyssey, with a secret history of its own.”

— Professor of divinity at Cambridge, and Dean of St Paul's Cathedral.

IV. If John’s story prompts the question “What are the questions which visit me in the night?” then the passage from Genesis gives us a place to ask: “What invitations to newness require a radical departure from the place and people who have shaped us?”

- A. **Abram & Sarai mark a truly significant moment in God’s calling of God’s people.**
- B. **Their calling is a calling to do far more than to save themselves — they are to “go!” so that:**
“...all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”
- C. **And yet, let us not too easily overlook the cost of faithfulness:**

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

1. **Loss of “home” — no country, no kindred, no ‘father’s house.’**
2. **To become what they are called to be — they must risk leaving behind many of the things which had defined them.**

3. **And there has to be a radical attempt to trust that God will make good on God's promises because that is all God gives - a promise to bless them if they will let go of things that have blessed them already in order to receive new blessings which are only promised - but not yet received.**

V. Now if this story is instructive for us as individuals (which it no-doubt is)

It is also instructive for the modern church in NA

- A. **There are comfortable and well-tested ways of being “church” which have truly been a blessing to us all, which we will need to wonder about leaving behind.**

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.”

B. Go from:

1. **Faith-formation as you've known it**
 - † **How will we go about “making disciples” in a context where the SS model is no longer blessing the majority of us?**
2. **Forms of worship that are comfortable**
 - † **You've known me long enough to know that I am an “old-school” kind of guy when it comes to liturgy — and yet, what new forms of worship or what forms of worship that will seem “new” to us as Presbyterians are needed?**
3. **Forms of “mission” that once were one-sided with us “helping” and others “receiving our**

**charity” to truly living into our commitment
as “faith-community *partners*”**

- C. I could go on — but I’m out of time and you are clever enough to think go other things which will be new in the decades ahead.**
- D. The act of faith required is to become so confined that God will go with us and will show us what we need to see that we risk leaving our country and our kindred and our father’s house — so to speak — in order to find ourselves one day in the land which God will show us.**
- E. Lent is just the sort of season to let us learn to be on this wild pilgrimage with the Almighty**
 - 1. And the astonishing mystery is that, in many ways, the journey of Lent and of our lives before God is actually a journey of introspection - leading us to the realization of our “belatedness” as children of God.**

“People travel to wonder at the heights of the mountains, at huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars . . . And they pass by themselves without wondering.”

St. Augustine of Hippo — The Confessions