

"MISUNDERSTAND"

John 3:1-17

March 8, 2020 Lent 2

York Center Church of the Brethren

Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

(Nicodemus monologue by Pam Saturnia)

For as long I can remember people have come to me with their questions about God. Even as a young boy, the other disciples of our Rabbi, would ask me to help them understand what the Rabbi was trying to teach us.

I was so proud to become a Pharisee, because I loved the laws and precepts of God. I wanted to devote my life to delighting in the law of the Lord and meditating on God's law day and night. So now when I walk around the streets of Jerusalem, people will stop and ask what I think about God and God's work among us. It is an honor to be entrusted with the questions and insights by these faithful people. But, they think I have all the answers. What they don't know is that I, too, am still seeking. What they don't understand is that I, too, am still learning.

We never know everything there is to know about God, which is why I went to see the teacher Jesus. Yes, it was dark. And if I am honest I went at night because there was less of a chance that I might be seen. I mean how would it look if I, a respected Pharisee, was seen with such a controversial figure.

In the end I didn't worry about being seen with him. In the end they tried to snuff out his light - the light of the world, the light that shines in the darkness. In the end Joseph of Arimethea asked for his body and I brought the spices for burial and we laid him in the tomb before it got dark.

As I mentioned, it was dark when I first met Jesus. I had to speak with this new Rabbi for he was doing signs that were clearly from God. I didn't so much have questions as much as I just wanted to be in his presence. And what he said to me, well, I couldn't wrap my head around it. He said "You cannot enter the kingdom of God without being born from above." So I asked him, "How can this be?" And his answer was, "How can you be a person of faith and not know this?" Like I said, I am still learning.

I didn't understand right away, but I finally realized that Jesus wasn't testing me. He wasn't asking me to figure out how I could be born anew, like it was some sort of puzzle to be solved. He was asking me if I wanted to be born anew. He was inviting me to consider a new relationship with God; a new relationship with God that was about following, not so

much the letter of the law, but following the Spirit of the law. He was inviting me to a new relationship with God that was about God's love being so deep and so wide that it encompasses the whole world.

In my life I have seen a lot of hate, and I have seen first-hand how others, even good religious leaders, can be threatened by new ideas. My own fellow Pharisees sought to kill this new Rabbi Jesus because they thought that he was a threat to their power. They hated him because he had different ideas about what life in God's kingdom could be like. Maybe they didn't think they had anything else to learn. Maybe they didn't realize that all of us, whether you are a learned person of faith or someone who is seeking for something more, all of us are still learning.

He changed my life. And I am grateful.

Last Sunday we found ourselves in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and in the wilderness with Jesus- all were tested and only Jesus triumphed. Today we are in Jerusalem with Jesus during the Festival of the Passover. Here we meet the first of four witnesses on our Lenten journey. They are people who encountered Jesus in very different circumstances and were changed forever. All four stories come to us from the Gospel of John.

If we were to look at the four Gospels in the New Testament- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and ask "Which one is not like the rest?" The clear answer would be John. He begins with a prologue which sets up the theological themes of his work, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."* We quickly meet John the Baptist who declares Jesus to be the "Lamb of God" and we are off and running as Jesus calls his first disciples and attends a wedding with his mother where he turns water into wine.

In John's Gospel miraculous acts are not called "miracles." They are called "signs" because they are symbols that point the way to God. You may also notice that Jesus speaks differently in this Gospel than he does in the other three. Here we don't find any of his ironic, mind-twisting, and sometimes humorous, parables; there is less dialogue between Jesus and others. He speaks mostly in long monologues and speeches and gives confusing answers.

One commentator suggests that John's greatest literary and theological technique is **misunderstanding**. It goes like this: someone asks Jesus a question. He gives them an answer and they say, "I don't get it."

He replies with a saying that is even more difficult to follow. And then he gives a speech and an explanation that most people still can't unravel. What a strange Gospel.

In his book, *THE FOURTH GOSPEL*, John Shelby Spong suggests that John's Gospel is about life- expanded life, abundant life, and ultimately, eternal life. He calls us to experience this Gospel as a *doorway into a new dimension of life.* He writes, *"It is a journey into the heart of life, a journey beyond the boundaries of life and ultimately a journey into both a new consciousness and a whole new understanding of what Christianity is."* (1)

John's Gospel is a call to transformation. Our Lenten journey invites us to experience Jesus as the witnesses in this Gospel experienced him; to bring him our questions and our misunderstandings; and to ultimately find ourselves transformed by his presence in our lives.

It is important to remember that John wrote to a community of Jewish Christians who had been ostracized for their belief in Jesus. Most likely many of them had been kicked out of their community synagogues. They were now considered to be outsiders by their own people. We also need to remember that John wrote his Gospel to be heard, not read silently by yourself. The stories we will hear in worship these next few weeks are long ones- and we will hear the whole thing because that is how they were intended to be heard.

Keep in mind that John's purpose is transformation. In chapter twenty, verse 31 we read, *"These words are written so that you may come to believe."* The purpose of this Gospel isn't to give us more information about Jesus. Its purpose is to allow us to encounter Jesus. And in doing so, something is supposed to happen to us. We are to be changed.

One of the prominent themes in John's gospel is the difference between light and darkness. For John, light equals belief, relationship with Jesus, and darkness equals unbelief, lack of relationship, or refusal to be in relationship with Jesus. So it is quite fitting that our first story of an encounter with Jesus happens late at night- when it is dark.

John sets up the tension in this story in the first two verses- it is dark and the visitor is a Pharisee.

Since entering the holy city of Jerusalem Jesus has been making a name for himself. He raised a ruckus in the temple, chasing out the merchants who were cheating the worshippers- all in the name of religion. It was the first of his many

accusations against the temple culture and the leaders who had allowed corruption and greed to make a home in God's house. You can be sure the religious leaders- including the Pharisees- were already holding meetings about this man Jesus and what they could do to stop him. That's what makes this nighttime visitor even more interesting.

Nicodemus is called a "leader of the Jews." He was part of the religious elite, a wealthy man, not only a Pharisee but also a member of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court. His credentials were impeccable. His reputation was stellar. He knew the Jewish law frontwards and backwards and sideways. He was the expert everyone else turned to with their questions. But apparently, something was missing for Nicodemus and he went to Jesus to find it.

John makes sure we know that this religious leader came to Jesus under the cover of darkness. Some suggest that he was sneaking around so other Pharisees wouldn't see him talking to Jesus. Some wonder if he was a spy, coming to question Jesus so he could report back to the Council. Or maybe, as a religious man himself, he knew that the best time to study the law was in the peace and quiet of the night when all of the distractions of the day were tucked into bed. Jesus was beginning to draw crowds so maybe Nicodemus thought the best time to have a serious conversation with this man was at night when he was alone.

Whatever his reason, it was dark.

He sits down with Jesus, calls him "rabbi" to show respect, and then begins with a compliment. *"We know that you are a teacher who has come from God; because no one would ever be able to do the kinds of things you are doing apart from God."* He didn't even ask a question and Jesus launches into a sermon about being born from above with wind and water and Spirit. And there sits poor Nicodemus thinking, "I just came by to say hello."

But Jesus knew that Nicodemus was searching for more than just a quick introduction. Jesus recognized a spiritual hunger in this man, a deep yearning for God. This late night meeting shows that not even religious leaders have all of the answers. In fact, sometimes we don't even know the questions.

Jesus offered him an invitation he didn't know how to begin to accept. It was almost as though they weren't speaking the same language. Nicodemus knows so much about religion that he can't find room for a relationship with Jesus. He is a curious but cautious person- one who is drawn to the amazing things Jesus is doing, but unwilling to take the next step

to change his life. Nicodemus has a good life. He is comfortable with a faith that comes from weighing all of the religious evidence and then drawing logical and sane conclusions. He has memorized the law of God and he thinks that is enough. He assumes he has reached the pinnacle of religious intelligence but Jesus says, "You are just a baby in the faith."

Jesus didn't criticize his faith. He just told him it is incomplete. He invited Nicodemus to put away his law books and enter into a relationship with God; to be open to the winds of the Spirit that cannot be controlled or legislated. Jesus brought a new way to relate to God; a new way to experience God's abundance and grace. It was through a personal, loving, intimate relationship. Jesus loses Nicodemus when he says "you must be born from above," sometimes translated as "born again." The Greek word can be translated, "again, anew, from above."

Nicodemus, and many Christians today, focus on just one of those translation, "born again." Karoline Lewis writes, *"It is humorous that someone of Nicodemus's assumed intellect would offer such a basic and banal understanding of what Jesus means."* (2) Nicodemus gets stuck on the "born again" part- literally trying to understand how a grown adult can once again become an infant. It makes no sense! But Jesus, of course, wasn't speaking in a literal sense, he was speaking in a spiritual sense. He was inviting this religious man to think with his heart and not just with his head.

"In John's Gospel, being born from above and believing in Jesus are clearly not so much about what one does with one's mind as about what one does with one's heart and one's life. Believing and doing are inseparable." (George Stroup)

Nicodemus has spent his life knowing the laws of God but he has yet to really **know** God. And when God in the flesh, Jesus, offers him an invitation he doesn't know what to do with it.

Rebirth, renewal, new life all require an ending to one way of living and the beginning of another. It is risky. It is scary. It isn't easy. And it doesn't happen just once in a lifetime but over and over again for us as individuals and as a faith community. The instigator of this new life is the Spirit of God. Called by one theologian, (Kalbryn McLean), "the Wild Child" of the Holy Trinity, the Spirit is like the wind- we cannot control it or contain it, only welcome it, trust that it is from God, and be open to its transforming power.

On that dark night Nicodemus was confronted with the bright light of the audacious, unexpected presence of God in the person of Jesus. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, *"As far as I can tell, the only thing Nicodemus did wrong on that night he met Jesus was to leave the room. If he had only been able to stay put with the sting of his ignorance a little longer- the fear of losing his grip, the anxiety of his unanswerable*

questions- if only he had been able to forgive himself, then a whole new way of life might have opened up for him.” (3)

If we keep reading in John's Gospel we will see that the light finally dawned on Nicodemus. I don't know when it happened, but he was transformed. And how do we know that? We find him in chapter seven defending Jesus' right to a hearing on the basis of Jewish law when the Pharisees wanted to arrest him (7:50-51). And there he is again at the end of John's Gospel, in chapter 19, after the horror of the crucifixion, assisting Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial (19:39-40).

Encountering Jesus in the Gospel of John is a moment of crisis in that one must either believe or not. In the coming weeks we will seek how others respond to his presence. We will meet a Samaritan woman at a well, a blind man who can suddenly see, and a grieving sister at her brother's tomb.

What we celebrate during this Lenten season is simply this: we worship a God who persists in making all things new- even Nicodemus- even us.

Amen.

End Notes:

- *THE FOURTH GOSPEL: TALES OF A JEWISH MYSTIC, John Shelby Spong. Harper One. 2013. P. 19.*
- *JOHN, Karoline M. Lewis, Fortress Press. 2014. P. 47*
- *HOLY ENVY: FINDING GOD IN THE FAITH OF OTHERS, Barbara Brown Taylor. Harper One. 2019. O. 173.*