

Sermon – March 8, 2020 Lent 2 - Show us the extent of your faithful, loving presence

Stepping into the questions

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Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; John 3:1-17

I don't know how many of you have been in the pastors' shared office space in, but there is a wall that has crosses from around the world that I've been collecting. A few days ago my grandson Enzo visited me here and offered this comment: "Nice plus signs, Nana! They all so different!"

As you can imagine, I wasn't sure how to reply because Enzo is at that amazing and frustrating phase in his development where his ability to keep on asking "Why?" far exceeds our capacity to satisfy his curiosity. I didn't know how I would go about telling a short version of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, much less explaining all about atonement theology to a four year old! Fortunately, this time I was able to deflect with a quick story, and a promise to myself to come back to the Jesus' life story more often.

My grandson, and every kid really, is on to something here. Questions are wonderful gateways into learning – for both the asker and the answerer. I've often commented how coming up with something to say to the children is often more difficult than preaching the sermon, because you have to wrestle with what you want to convey that in a way that is understandable. The great Greek philosopher Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.) "was in the habit of asking disconcerting questions. To this day, persistent questioning in search of clarity is known as the Socratic method. For this habit, among other things, he was put on trial by the Athenians, accused of 'corrupting the young,' and sentenced to death."¹ Any of you familiar with this method, know that asking questions is a much more fruitful way to learning than, well, lecturing or preaching.

(Yet I'll go on with the preaching tradition this time – any questions?)

So here we have two stories of bible people interacting with the **invitation from God to step into something new**: Abram and Sarai, and Nicodemus. On the surface, have very different reactions to this invitation. What they have in common is that they are all on a journey of faith: an experience of learning how to trust in God.

When God invites Abram to move to a different place, with promises of blessings. Abram seems to just say, "Sure!", and sets off to the "promised land," no questions asked. God tells him that he's going to become a great nation – despite having no kids and only a somewhat difficult nephew – and he takes the next steps, without

¹ <https://www.myjli.com/why/index.php/2016/11/30/the-art-of-asking-questions/>

knowing what will happen. He just trusts God, as best as he can, and sets out. It turns out it's not quite as easy as it seems at the time, but eventually it all turns out right.

Nicodemus, on the other hand, seems to ask a whole bunch of questions and then gets stuck on "Uh, How can this be?"

Let's look a bit more closely at his story.

This account of Nicodemus comes in chapter 3 of the Gospel of John. So far in this gospel, we've been told all about how God became embodied and came to live among "us" in the person of Jesus (the Word became flesh, remember?); how Jesus went about calling people to be his followers, how he turned water into wine at a wedding, and even went so far as to enter the place of worship, the Temple at Passover, and "cleanse it" from its misplaced commercial ventures. All this has happened and now we have Nicodemus.

The writer of John tells us that people were very impressed with all Jesus' "signs." But "Jesus didn't trust himself to them because he knew all people. He didn't need anyone to tell him about human nature, for he knew what human nature was." (John 2:23-25)

And right after those words, begins this story of encounter and revelation between Jesus and Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, which was someone in his day who earnestly and sincerely believed that the way to please God was to do one's best and obey all the rules. Does that sound familiar? Some of us might still be stuck there, for perfection to please God.

He also held to the Jewish faith – as did Jesus by the way – and to his Jewish tradition of learning about God, which was (and still is) to engage with a rabbi and to ask hard questions.

An article from the Jewish Learning Institute called "How to Ask Good Questions" says the following: "Abraham Twerski, the American psychiatrist, remembers how, when he was young, his teacher would welcome questions, the more demanding the better. When faced with a particularly tough challenge, he would say, in his broken English: 'You right! You hundred prozent right! Now I show you where you wrong.'

The Nobel prize-winning Jewish physicist Isidore Rabi once explained that his mother taught him how to be a scientist. 'Every other child would come back from school and be asked, "What did you learn today?" But my mother used to ask, instead, "Izzy, did you ask a good question today?"'²

² <https://www.myjli.com/why/index.php/2016/11/30/the-art-of-asking-questions/>

I want to stress this aspect of asking questions, especially about Nicodemus because Christians have often understood Pharisees as the villains of Jesus' story. This way of looking at things sets up a very dangerous "us and them" between Christians and Jews, which, as we know from history, can have devastating consequences.

For that matter, Christians have often been told that having questions means not having enough faith. Nothing could be further from the way faith works. In fact, if faith were a game, questioning is often what moves us on to the next level.

Some of us have heard this story of Jesus and Nicodemus waaay too many times, it's hard to hear it differently. If you like the story, maybe that's great. But I also want to invite you to newness and to bear with me as I try out some of my own ways of saying things to try to get them unstuck.

Another thing, try, as best as you can to steer away from what you've heard me call "preachy Jesus;" that Jesus that is always telling someone what to do. This is much more in line of a conversation or an engagement in a spiritual practice.

I invite you to picture the scene. It is evening, there's a soft wind, Nicodemus and Jesus are up on the balcony looking over the town, having an honest to goodness conversation under the starry array of the cosmos.

Here's how it starts. When faced with Jesus, Nicodemus just couldn't put two and two together: How could this possible heretic rabbi be gathering followers and exhibiting such powerful signs?

He scratches his head and it doesn't make sense: You're a new kind of rabbi, teaching in a new and disturbing way, yet "no one can do these things you do apart from the presence of God."

Jesus responds, "You're right, and no one can even *see* the reign of God unless they are born anew." I always wonder whether Jesus was giving Nicodemus credit for realizing that God was at work.

I learned in my reading that the word that Jesus uses here about birth in Greek (*anōthen*), can be translated either as again, anew or from above. So he's either saying born again, born anew or born from above, or all three. There's a lot of wordplay going on. You can see why the Pharisee was a bit confused, I know I am!

Jesus was inviting Nicodemus to see things differently, to try something on that was not the usual approach.

Says Nicodemus, "Oh, I wish I could start over, but I'm an old man." So was Abram, by the way. God doesn't care about age, young or old. Isn't that wonderful? I take great comfort in that.

And then Jesus replies: “Here’s something really surprising. With God, there is *always* the possibility of regeneration. You need a body, so you’re born in one, water in the womb and all that. But there’s more than body, you can also come into God’s reign through the Spirit, through breath. You can be generated, regenerated, be born from above, born anew. Body and spirit come together. “One is not reborn to a new life apart from the physical body; one is reborn into a new life within the physical body.”³

And then the wordplay keeps on going! You will recall that the word for spirit and wind and breath are all the same in the biblical languages. Jesus starts to talk about the nature of the wind or the Spirit, or indeed of birth.

Here’s the thing we should remember with these metaphors of wind and breath and birth. They all have a logic of their own. Like the wind, God’s Spirit blows where it chooses. Like the breath, that breathes us. We just turn our attention to it, recognize and let it transform. Try not breathing and see what your body does. It calls out for breath. It’s just there. This is how our bodies work.

Birth also comes when it is the right time. Every pregnant person who has ever packed a hospital bag then had the baby in the taxi knows how unpredictable birth can be. Every person who has had a drip attached to induce labour and thinks it’s going to be quick and it takes days, knows how unpredictable birth can be. Imagine how the baby feels in all this! It comes on it’s own time and it will not be negotiated with.

Jesus is drawing on powerful images from bodies and from nature, birth and wind, to describe what it is like to open oneself up to God. Even though our series on women of the Bible is over, today on International Women’s day, I’m tickled that we are being offered an image of God giving birth! How about that?

To be clear, “you must be born anew” is not setting up a requirement, or a hoop one needs to jump through. It’s just Jesus’ way of describing how things are when we turn ourselves over to God. In this metaphor, you’re the baby. You can’t do this, you need God’s Spirit in order to be renewed and reborn.

Then Jesus goes off on an explanation of above and below – and we’re just going to park that for now.

³ “The physical birth and the spiritual rebirth go hand-in-hand here. They are not distinct options, because flesh and spirit belong together in the new birth Jesus envisions. One is not reborn to a new life apart from the physical body; one is reborn into a new life within the physical body.” Gail R O’Day, “The Gospel of John”, *Women’s Bible Commentary*, p. 520

And finally we arrive at everyone's favourite bible verse, John 3:16 that is lovely, and has been misused. Here's my version: For God so *loved* the cosmos as to give the only begotten or the birthed One, that whoever believes or trusts may not die, but have eternal life. God sent the only One into the world not to condemn the world, but that through them the world might be healed.

God so loves the cosmos... not to condemn.

You have heard it said that you must "believe" the right things, that is to say grasp them intellectually, but I say to you, (as I have said many times before), that the idea of belief in scripture is much closer to what Abram did, it means to trust.

You have heard it said that eternal life is about what happens after you die, but I say to you that it is about the quality of life in the Spirit starting now, yesterday, forever.

To quote Marcus Borg, "when you think about it, faith as belief is relatively impotent, relatively powerless. You can believe all the right things and still be in bondage. You can believe all the right things and still be miserable. You can believe all the right things and still be relatively unchanged. Believing a set of claims to be true has very little transforming power."⁴

So what Jesus is saying here is that in order to be born anew, renewed, we, you, Nicodemus, must trust in God. Give up all the trying to earn God's favour by being good (although it's good to be good), give up trying to sort everything out before hand and embrace God's transforming love of you, for you.

Trusting is what every baby needs to do when it is pushed out of a womb and into a new world. Trusting in God, as in Jesus, is giving yourself up to this incredible power of love and transformation.

Socrates, the question-asker that I told you about in the beginning, in response to being called wise, was known to have said "I know that I know nothing." Even after all Nicodemus' wondering, he ended his conversation with Jesus at: "How can this be?"

Not all his questions got answered. But as the gospel unfolds, his rebirth also unfolds and eventually he becomes a follower of Jesus and an ally. In chapter 7, in the Sanhedrin when they wanted condemn Jesus as a heretic, Nicodemus is the one stood up to defend due process and said: Since when "does our law judge a person without giving him a hearing and learning what he does?"

And even later (perhaps too late) in chapter 19, "Nicodemus [finally] aligns himself publicly with Jesus ... by joining Joseph of Arimathea in removing Jesus's body from the cross burying him with an enormous outlay of spices." Nicodemus "progresses in

⁴ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*

faith from seeing the signs [asking the questions], to doing the truth according to scripture, to finally confessing Jesus openly.”⁵

Nicodemus’ story puts me in mind of a quote by poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

Whoever you are, a question asker or a risk taker, God can handle it.
Wherever you are, in a windy place where all you thought you knew is being shaken up and blown away,
Or in a tight dark space, feeling alone
It may just be God’s breath or God’s womb inviting you to be born into something new.
God so loves the cosmos
God so loves you
God will not let your footsteps slip.
Trust this.

I will end up with a poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes.

*THE WIND*⁶ by Steve Garnaas-Holmes

*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.*
—John 3.8

*God said to Abram, “Go from your country
and your kindred and your father’s house
to the land that I will show you.”*
—Genesis 12.1

Wind of God, blow me where you will.
Fill my sails. Be my course.

Raise my anchor, holding so fast.

⁵ Sandra Schneiders, *Written that you may Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 119.

⁶ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, www.unfoldinglight.net, March 5, 2020

Cut the lines that tie me to the dock.

Your deep breathing and laboring love
birth me through this canal of life into life.

Lead me to a place I can't name
can't control, can't choose first.

Even if the strange place is within,
the foreign land my neighbor.

Spirit, my wind on the baptismal water,
give me courage to be blown off course

with love, abandon my ego's maps.
Breathe me into the New World,

you, my ship, my captain, my natal sea,
my breath, the only place I hope to go.