

How do we begin again?

Sermon 175 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 5, 2023

John 3:1-17

I always imagined Nicodemus was a younger man. A Pharisee, like the texts says. Probably a little naive, someone who had a hard time understanding the gray areas of life mainly because he hadn't experienced any yet.

I always figured he was drawn to the Pharisees because of their clearly defined rules with predictable outcomes. In a world like that, he could feel safe. Actions had rewards and consequences. Things were exactly as they seemed on the surface.

I don't know why but this is how I always imagined him.

I never thought about him as an older man, one with age-worn lines on his face. Experience allowing him the position he held as a leader among Pharisees. There isn't a whole lot of background on Nicodemus in the Bible, but John does say that he was a Pharisee, a leader among the Jews.

I never really thought about it before, or considered my assumptions about the age of this would-be disciple, until I looked at the cover art and read the statement from the artist describing his gray-ing hair, his aging body, and then considering the different set of questions that come with age.

You see, if Nicodemus is a young man when he comes to Jesus in the middle of the night, he brings with him the presumption of a trickster. Someone with a little bit of provocateur within, perhaps wanting to pull one over on Jesus or tie him into some kind of rhetorical trap. There are plenty of those types in the Gospels, so why not Nicodemus?

Someone who doesn't quite get it, a little ignorant, a little naive, someone totally in the dark about all things spiritual. [ah hah?!] But he was a Pharisee, didn't they specialize in matters of faith?

If Nicodemus is an older man, he doesn't quite fit this stereotype. His nighttime pilgrimage and the questions that he asks... they seem a lot less proud, and a lot more vulnerable.

When he comes to Jesus, Jesus tells him to see the Kingdom of God you have to be born again. Remember, when John writes these words it is long before the evangelical movements of the more recent years gained the monopoly on what they meant.

Here, John is doing one of the things John does best and using words that have multiple meanings. To be born "again" means to start over, to be born of heaven or of God, to become a new creation.

When you're young the idea of starting over isn't really that big of a deal. Every day is a new day with opportunity and reward waiting just up ahead. Life is full of fresh starts and new beginnings and we have all the time in the world to watch each path run its course.

A new school year, a new sports season.

New friends and a new town.

A new house, a new job.

A new relationship, a new decade.

Each new thing offers promise and hope. The future is yet to be known, the story is yet to be written. The questions are accompanied by excitement and the answers present possibilities that stretch the mind in hopes of finding a new way.

But as we grow older, the pages of the past are full and plentiful; they tell the story of who we have become. That paths we chose, the life that unfolded. The things we did well and right... and the places we missed the mark. For us the past holds the lies we once foolishly believed, the promises that remain unkept, the wrongs that went unpunished, and the loves that broke our hearts.

We are more who we are each day, because that person - the one we have become - is but a summary of all the days that went before. And as we reach those middle and later years, we begin to realize that the number of days that have gone before probably outnumber the days that are to come. So the age-ed curiosity that might ask the question: How could I be born again? Might really be asking: Have I had it all wrong all this time? or...Is there really time for me to start over?

Rather than hopeful possibility and curiosity, the questions come with worry that the journey has been leading in exactly the wrong direction.

There is no way to know exactly what was going on in the mind of Nicodemus. The handful of clues in the text only leave us with a rough sketch of the man. So much remains a mystery. But I'm not so sure that is a bad thing because it gives us some space to wonder.

(Remember how I said the Born Again words have multiple meanings? And that's something John does regularly in his Gospel....) Here's another thing he does throughout..., He uses symbols of light and darkness. It's all over his Gospel. And it's in the Nicodemus story too.

Nicodemus comes in the middle of the night, implying both that he did not want to be seen and that he was, in many ways, in the dark himself.

Remember, Jesus, according to John, is the light of the world, the one who brings sight to the blind, to those who walk in darkness, the one who illuminates the way, and since this is who Jesus is, then Nicodemus has come to the right place to find his enlightenment.

Nicodemus is also a Pharisee, this detail was important enough for John to include it. The Pharisees, as you know, were a sect within the Jewish faith, they concerned themselves with the laws and traditions of faith. In the Gospels we often find Pharisees questioning Jesus as his ministry departs from those laws, often choosing love of neighbor over the legalism of the religious establishment.

When Nicodemus comes to Jesus, the very things they represent come face to face. When Nicodemus comes to Jesus, the law, the traditions, the religious institution come face to face with Love incarnate.

(For God so LOVED the world, he sent his only son...)

Many years have passed since this fateful late-night encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, but people of faith, seekers of all ages, continue to bring our most raw, vulnerable, and honest questions to Jesus.

Most often, we begin in the dark - in our places of unknowing, where we feel safe from the judgments or even awareness of others.

As we ask these honest questions, all of us are wondering the same thing: How can we begin again? Like Nicodemus, many of us are beginning to see that there are some things about life, about faith, maybe even about God that we thought we had figured out, and now we're not so sure. So we come with our honest doubts and our most authentic curiosity asking if transformation is possible, asking if new life really is up ahead, wondering if we can really be born again?

Now I know that Baptists don't really have patron saints, (faithful disciples who have long passed away but somehow continue to transcend time and space to guide us on the spiritual journey.) But for those of us who are seeking, who are looking for God in the darkness of night, who are tired of holding onto our questions alone, tired of waiting for a space safe enough to give them voice...

For all of us who are wondering if there is a possible future with God where we might continue to be made new and born again... I wonder if Nicodemus shouldn't be our patron saint?

Ever since the Christian church was founded it has been formed and reformed by faithful seekers who dared to ask the difficult and risky questions. First it was a question of how God wanted Israel to treat their foreign-born neighbors. Does God care for the stranger like God cares for the neighbor? Then it was a question of Gentile inclusion. Is the Gospel good news for them too?

As the world expanded and explorers discovered new lands, new people, new customs, new ways of life... Christians had gained a lot of earthly power. We had assumed some things about our place in this world and had to learn (with devastating effect on indigenous peoples and on our own souls) that we were wrong. Wrong about them, wrong about their value in the eyes of God, and wrong in the ways that we treated them. Aren't they God's beloved, too?

During this same period of colonization, exploration and discovery, the church reformers asked their question: Shouldn't the Bible be translated from the Hebrew and Greek known only in exclusive religious circles, shouldn't it also be available in the language of the common folk too? Isn't the Bible for everyone? Brave questions weighed down with risk and overflowing with possibility.

A few centuries later, the church in the United States found itself in a peculiar situation when the brutality of chattel slavery finally broke through the twisted understanding of slaveholder's religion and somebody got the courage to ask: Doesn't God care for all the people of the world, isn't the beauty of God reflected and born in the black and brown skin of our African neighbors too. Are they not God's beloved? And since they are, how can we treat them with such disregard, prejudice and hatred?

Brave questions that lingered too long in the silence. Overflowing with possibility and hope for a new beginning, but wrought with so much risk that people didn't dare ask for far too long.

Now we find ourselves at a similar crossroads. A pivotal time in the history of our church - a moment pregnant with possibility, just waiting for someone to ask the honest questions. And still it is a moment that is saturated with fear because the questions alone carry great risk.

Risk that we might discover we have been wrong in the past. Risk that we might lose a bit of ourselves in the process. Risk that friends, long loved, might decide to walk away. Risk that our church might change and never be the same.

But in the question there is also the hope... hope that we might be reborn and that as we are, we might get a chance to begin again, and to get it right this time.

While there are many and varied questions that we might bring to the feet of Jesus in our own dark nights, there is one question we must finally bring into the light together. It is a question that has been asked over and over again in solitude and darkness, around dinner tables, at youth group gatherings, and in the relative safety of Sunday school classes. It is a question many of you have written on post-it notes asked in meetings and voiced in our Growing Young conversations.

And now, following in the footsteps of Nicodemus the Pharisee, we bring our fears and our hopes together with it, we bring our honest question to Jesus: Is God leading us, as a congregation to welcome, include, and affirm all people regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity? Is God's love big enough to liberate us from the legalism and the laws that have kept us apart, that have continued to perpetuate cycles of shame, and that have too often inflicted irreparable harm? Is there grace enough in God's love to allow us to be born again, into the fullest expression of God's love that our minds and hearts can possibly conceive?

We recognize that we will never, in this human life, understand God completely, but it is time to find out if we could be made new through the asking of this honest question just as Nicodemus was made new through the asking of his?

The Question:

Is God leading us, as a congregation to welcome, include, and affirm all people regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity?

(We may not know the outcome, but we can ignore the question no more...)

Like so many of us and like so many who come to Jesus in the Gospels, through his questions, Nicodemus is searching for healing and wholeness. He can see that Jesus is the Son of God, (Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, he says) but the way Jesus is acting, some of the things that he is saying, they just don't fit with the teachings of the Pharisees' religion. The love of God is stretching beyond the laws of religion.

And this causes Nicodemus to question: How can this be?

And this is when Jesus says:

No one can enter the Kingdom of heaven without being born of water and Spirit.

Here we go with the double meanings again, remember water implies the waters of the womb and the waters of baptism.

Jesus continues: Do not be astonished that I said to you, you must be born from above. 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.

Again with the double meanings: Spirit and Wind are the same word.

Maybe Nicodemus wants to know how Jesus knows when to follow the Spirit choosing love over law. In response to Nicodemus's questions, Jesus talks about being born from above, born of the Wind, born of the Spirit... that same Spirit that hovered over the darkness before the world was born. That same Spirit that will later animate the church at Pentecost...

You know that Holy Spirit, she is unruly, and risky, and unpredictable, and sometimes even downright unsafe. But remember that Jesus has said: Those who want to save their life, must lose it. And Jesus also tells Nicodemus that we must be born of THAT Spirit, that Spirit who blows through with winds of New Life, that Spirit that gives us

- new language,
- new ideas,
- new missions,
- new life
- New Birth
- and new ways to show God's Love

That Spirit is God's Spirit and it is always pushing us, the Church, into new and uncharted territory... because those places are precisely the places where new life and new birth become possible.

So if we are looking to begin again, maybe we should follow the path of Nicodemus Who brings his doubt and his faith, his fear and his hope to Jesus.

How can an old man, an old woman, and perhaps even an old CHURCH be reborn?

Well....

... for Nicodemus, it all started with an honest question.