

Circle of Mercy Sermon
“Born Again” John 3:1-17
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by Missy Harris

Are you born again? It’s a question that, for some of us, may elicit a guttural kind of response.

When we hear this question in our context today, we assume that we know the motives behind it – the intention of the question – to determine whether we are considered to be an insider or an outsider. But I think the question is about a lot more than that.

And our text tonight from John gives us the larger story around the one verse – John 3:16 – that so often gets taken out of context, extracted from the story that gives it a fuller and more complex meaning for all of us, no matter where we fall on the theological spectrum.

I actually love the story of Nicodemus. He probably wouldn’t make the top ten list of recognizable figures from the Gospels, but his story is one that we should acquaint ourselves with more thoroughly.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was a leader. He was educated. He studied the law. It’s likely that the law ordered his life and understanding of the world. It was clear and dependable. John tells us that Nicodemus sought Jesus out at night. We can make assumptions about why Nicodemus went looking for Jesus at night. Maybe he didn’t want others who knew him as a leader – a visible, educated and respected person – to see him seeking Jesus to find out more about his identity, to know that he acknowledged Jesus as a teacher because others in positions of power – his friends and colleagues – might have denied or thought such claims to be absurd, even heretical.

But, it's possible that Nicodemus seeking Jesus in the night is a little more complex than his possible embarrassment or not wanting to be seen.

The Gospel of John actually has a lot to say about what happens at night. Later in the Gospel, when passing by a man who had been blind from birth, the disciples asked Jesus who had sinned – the man or his parents. Jesus essentially told them that they were asking the wrong question. It wasn't about who had sinned, but it was about what was possible in the present moment. He urged them to focus their energy on the work of the one who sent him, while it was day because night was coming, when no one can work (John 9:4).

Later, after Jesus received the news that his good friend Lazarus had died, he told the disciples he needed to return to Judea. They objected – Are you crazy? They were just trying to kill you. Why would you want to go back there? He responded saying “those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” (John 11:10)

In his last meal with the disciples, Jesus dipped the bread into the cup and gave it to Judas, the one who was to betray him. Immediately after receiving the bread from Jesus, Judas went out into the night (John 13:30).

The night was a time when the disciples fished, but caught nothing. (John 21)

Night, at least in the Gospel of John, seems to indicate a time when things are not quite as clear as we would like for them to be. It's a time when disorder seems to reign over order, where the unexpected trumps the predictable. The night is a time when typical work ceases (though this can be a foreign concept to our modern sensibilities since work as well as leisure are available 24 hours a day/7 days a week). Night represents where we sometimes turn when we feel lost or uncertain – a place that offers both escape and refuge.

Within this context, let's return to the story of Nicodemus.

As we think about who Nicodemus was, his role and position in the community, we might assume why he chose that particular time to visit Jesus. But given the larger theme of what occurs at night in the Gospel of John, I wonder if the one recounting the story may have had another reason for indicating that Nicodemus came to find Jesus at night.

Don't we all, in various ways, have both a daytime life/identity – the one that people recognize and see, the one that we lead with, the one that we work hard to establish and maintain, and a nighttime life/identity – the one that is sometimes less visible, that we try to mask or hide where we hold our doubts and fears, where we have questions, confusion, uncertainty, where we wish that we could seek out one who could give us some clarity?

Sometimes, it seems like Abby saves all of her biggest questions for the night – right at bedtime.

Now, this could be a delay tactic – Abby trying to eek out just a little more time to be awake.

But, sometimes it's the time of day when we are the most still, when we read and sing and say our prayers, when we slow down enough to listen to ourselves.

Occasionally, as I walk back to the living room after tucking her in, she'll call out to me, "Mom..." and I return to her bedside. She'll want me to hold her hand or sing her one more song. Often, though, she'll blurt out one of those questions that it's clear she's been carrying around all day – "The girl at afterschool who had a seizure, is she going to be okay? Will she have another seizure? Did she have to go to the hospital? Who took her – her mom, her dad or the ambulance? Why do people have seizures? Why are there tornadoes? Will there be tornadoes here? So . . . if there probably won't be tornadoes here, why do we have to do those drills at school? Is Elvis really dead? How did he die?" or she will make an important declaration – "I'm going to be brave tomorrow when I'm a car rider after the movie at school. I'm not going to cry."

While these questions tend to emerge at night, I don't think it has all that much to do with a particular time of day, whether the sun is high above us or has set on the horizon, replaced by the moon and stars. It has more to do with finally getting to the point of being still enough to work up the nerve to ask the real questions, when we get to that point of wanting to try to bring some light and clarity to our deepest wonderings, to the parts of ourselves that are always there, just below the surface, a time when we let go of whatever night time it is that conceals our questions.

In his interaction with Jesus, Nicodemus led with an affirmation “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God” (John 3:2). His starting point wasn’t accusatory or hostile. He wasn’t challenging Jesus. He actually affirmed that Jesus was a teacher and was revealing something true and compelling and mysterious, something Nicodemus clearly wanted to know more about.

But Jesus appeared to be answering questions that Nicodemus didn’t even ask, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to – to God’s kingdom.”

And Nicodemus gets hooked, veers off course from his initial, seemingly open approach to Jesus – missing the point completely. The Greek word *anōthen* doesn’t actually have an exact English equivalent. In the Greek, the word holds two meanings simultaneously – born “again” and “from above.”

Nicodemus got sidetracked, taking only half the meaning of the word – born “again.” Wait just a minute, “How can anyone be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from above’ talk?”
(John 3:4 *The Message*)

But the words that follow from Jesus, recalibrate the conversation toward the deeper truth he is pointing to in his words about rebirth – holding both meanings simultaneously “again” and “from above.” Nicodemus, it’s not about returning to your mother’s womb.

“You’re not listening. Let me say it again. (And I want you to hear this beautiful imagery again.)

“Unless a person submits to this original creation, the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life – it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who has taken shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch – the Spirit – and becomes a living spirit.” (John 3:5-6 *The Message*)

The interaction between Nicodemus and Jesus continued, with Nicodemus inquiring again about what Jesus meant and how the things he spoke of could possibly happen. He asked the questions that plagued him in the nighttime, the questions for which he sought a rational answer, the questions that – if he could just get the right answers to – would make the path a little clearer for him, might re-establish some order to his universe.

But it doesn’t seem like Nicodemus walked away from this encounter with all of the questions checked off on his list. In fact, he might have walked away frustrated and confused – thrust back into his daytime world with less clarity than before he approached Jesus.

But, with this story as the backdrop, we encounter Nicodemus a couple more times later in John. It’s in the later accounts that involve Nicodemus where I think the mystery of the Spirit – that which cannot be contained, that which he seemed to not understand when he was with Jesus, the “wind-hovering-over-the-water” creation, the invisible moving the visible, begins to do its work within him.

In John 7, Nicodemus reappears with the leaders who want to question and arrest Jesus. I wonder if Nicodemus' previous encounter with Jesus was stirring within him, causing his heart to beat a little bit faster, letting him know that he needed to say something, that he had to say something. Nicodemus appealed to the law and spoke up on behalf of Jesus saying, we don't condemn people without first giving them a hearing, to find out what they are doing (John 7:50ff).

Nicodemus appealed to the law, what he knew better than anything, on behalf of the one who urged him to see beyond what was known and predictable. I wonder if he was surprised for the words to be coming from his mouth in the presence of others who had no idea about his earlier encounter with Jesus. I wonder if he finally felt deep in his bones that experience of the invisible moving the visible. The wind seemed to be blowing through at the right moment. Something beyond what he could see with his eyes compelled him to be bold, to ask the difficult question, at precisely the right moment.

And again, after Jesus' death, Nicodemus showed up. He joined Joseph of Arimathea (who ironically was described as a "secret disciple" of Jesus), to collect Jesus' body from the cross. Together they took Jesus' body to a borrowed tomb for burial – anointing his body with 100 pounds of spices and wrapping it in fine linens before placing it inside the tomb. What Joseph and Nicodemus were doing was one of the most holy and sacred acts. They were preparing Jesus' body for burial, and whether they knew it or not – rebirth.

As Nicodemus alongside Joseph prepared Jesus' body for burial, I wonder if echoes of Jesus' words were in the back of his mind – “But the person within is formed by something you can't see and touch – the Spirit – and it becomes a living spirit.” Here Nicodemus and Joseph were, at the time when Jesus' closest followers had scattered, publicly taking care of his body for burial.

Jesus had reminded Nicodemus about the qualities of the Spirit. “You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.”

It's the sense that takes shape within us, that which compels to act and respond, even when we don't have all of the answers – actually when we tend to have more questions than certainties – when it may be risky. It's the movement of this Spirit within Nicodemus and Joseph that compelled them to show up. It's the movement of this Spirit that helped Nicodemus bring a little closer together his nighttime identity with his daytime identity

We know the Spirit is there. We see and hear and feel evidence of her presence. But the mystery lies in the fact that it surrounds, enfolds and touches everything – but it never gets too attached. It's there and we see it for just a moment, and then it's gone. We usually can't explain what happened or where it went. We can't force it to happen, but it returns in subtle and emphatic ways.

At home, we've been intentional about using the correct names for human anatomy with Abby. The thing we can't control is how she hears or interprets what we say. One night several years ago, as she was getting ready for bed, she sat down in my lap, placed her hands on my abdomen and said, "I remember when I was in your universe." After a second, I realized that she meant to say, "I remember when I was in your uterus," so I reminded her what the correct word was.

But now, as I think back to that moment, I wonder if she somehow got the mystery that, as adults we sometimes forget – that she understood at some primal level the simultaneous meaning of what it is to be born "again" and "from above" – that it's much larger than physical birth – that it's about being welcomed into this wide and expansive universe.

It is rebirth into this mystery that leads us into a more "whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending Jesus merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. Jesus came to help, to put the world right again."

So, let's be prepared, be ready to be born into this beautiful, Spirit filled, world, into THIS universe that God has created again and again and again.

Amen.

Benediction

Friends, go in peace, toward the whole and lasting life that is available to all. Be reborn again and again and again.

