

I invite you to close your eyes this morning and imagine being out of this rain to someplace exotic. Where might that be? You don't need to open your eyes right now, just call out to me. So where are you? Where is the most exotic place you could be...and if you're in a hotel in that exotic place....what does it look like? What are its features? What amenities stick out for you in this exotic place? If you were reading a brochure about the place you have in mind, what words would you read?

Okay...come on back. This is exactly what's happening in the movie the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel. If you've not seen this movie, I encourage you to hit the matinee this afternoon. You will be charmed. The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel follows the story of a group of British retirees who decide to retire to the less expensive, more exotic India

Each of them picked up the brochure. A couple, living within the shell of a loveless marriage, unable to afford desirable retirement accommodations on their modest civil service pensions, pick up the brochure on a stunning hotel catering to beautiful retired people and decide to travel to Jaipur India. One woman, a racist, tight-fisted spinster, won't afford the hip replacement she needs in Great Britain and decides to have her surgery in Jaipur, chooses the same hotel for her convalescence. A Supreme Court magistrate who lived his life as a lonely, miserable gay man, tosses in the towel after attending a lifeless retirement dinner for one of his colleagues, remembering his upbringing in Jaipur where he had met the love of his life 40 years earlier. There are others who find the brochure. A woman who lived her life surrounded by handsome suitors, afraid that she's "lost" her sex appeal, a fellow who wants to hang onto his youth and pursue women 30 years his junior, and a grieving widow, who'd been kept in her marriage by her husband who did everything for her,

They've all discovered the brochure to the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, Jaipur and decide to pick up stakes so late in life, and move to India to live out their retirements in a manner would not have been able to afford in Great Britain. The brochure promises a hotel of immense luxury and comfort, a former palace of Indian gentry. When they arrive, they find the living accommodations aren't quite as luxurious as portrayed in the brochure. Despite having to cope with broken furniture, phones that don't work and food they can't pronounce, amid the frenetic energy, the colours and smells, and the never ending din of a busy

India city, they share a number of unconventional and very funny experiences that bring them closer together. And in that coming together, their lives are transformed.

Coming together, community, love embodied, love enacted, re-awakening to a life a faith, born of the spirit; that is exactly what Jesus is holding out to Nicodemus in the story Myrna shared with us this morning. Nicodemus is not unlike those very early followers who are amazed at Jesus' capacity for compassion, for healing, for acceptance, for grace, and the way in which those qualities expressed, transforms the lives of the ones he touches.

This story comes early in John's telling of the events of Jesus' ministry. He has turned water into wine at the wedding feast. He has come to Jerusalem to the feast of the Passover and has been repulsed by the corruption of the temple leaders in their financial deal with the money changers and sellers of animals for sacrifice. In a rage he has cleared them out. Then he hangs around the temple for the few days, teaching and preaching and healing and many come to believe because of all these shock and awe signs and wonders. Nicodemus is also just as impressed. Lots of us are. We pray to God, our loved one gets well and we believe in the miracle. Signs and Wonders. We pray to God, we get the job and we trust that this was God's will. Signs and Wonders.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader among the leaders, is intrigued by Jesus, wonders having witnessed the rage that cleared the temple and having seen the same signs and wonders. He comes to Jesus at night. Why? He doesn't want his colleagues to see him. He cannot be seen cavorting with the enemy. He comes and confesses what we all confess when life goes right for us after we've prayed to God. "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." Shock and Awe. I'm impressed he says. You must be touched by the hand of God.

But Jesus keeps his ego in check...it's not about him. It's about the Spirit and where it blows and upon whom it touches. And it's about ushering in the kingdom of God. This is Jesus number one purpose, it's recorded in all of the four gospels, to usher in the kingdom of God. He says "no one can see the kingdom of God, without being born from above." Well Nicodemus doesn't get that...in fact most of don't. Nicodemus goes all physical. How can anyone climb back into their mother's womb and be born a second time? He asks quite naively. We hear born from above, born again, and wonder about religious zealots, hitting us on the head with healing, watching scores of people writhe on

the floor speaking the gibberish we've heard is called speaking in tongues. Signs and Wonders. We've both missed the mark.

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The 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."

Nicodemus doesn't get it. "How can these things be?" he asks. And Jesus is astonished. You are a teacher of Israel (the law is all about binding up the broken people of Israel; the tribal laws are about building a distinct community) and you do not understand these things? He may not understand, and the scriptures are silent about it until the very end, but I get a sense that Nicodemus came to know, because he was the one who made himself ritually unclean by catching the limp, lifeless body, of Jesus as it came down from the cross.

To be born of water and the spirit is to usher in the kingdom of God...characterized by an inward grace and an outward focus, for individuals and within the community. This is the hard work of loving when we don't feel like it; of being centers of compassion and forgiveness when it's so much easier to hold on to old scores. The kingdom of God is about a radical change in the status of all that asserts there is no grace until we are all graced. There is no justice until we all experience justice. There is no peace until we all live in peace. There is no healing until the world and the whole of creation is healed. And according to this story, it begins with deep personal transformation.

It means a complete transformation, a process, or an instant that opens our eyes to our own stereotypes, that challenges us with our bigotry and prejudices, that confronts our ego's need to win. To be born of water and the Spirit is to see life and our place in it through the heart of God – a heart of compassion. And it is to live as though this moment, right here right now, is the only moment there is.

As I think of the transformation in that group of retirees in the Best Exotic Hotel and think about what Nicodemus' own personal transformation might have been, I think of two women of distinction, who have graced my life. The first is Kay Nash, a woman of the congregation in Vernon, quite bent because of her osteoporosis, gnarled hands because of arthritis, with sparkling eyes, a dazzling

smile, an irascible whit, who at 90, was the first to join the drumming circle that eventually included 5 year olds.

I was reminded of Kay, last Saturday, at Lynn Valley Day, when I saw Lil Speers, the second woman of distinction who has graced my life, pick up the Irish drum known as the Bohdran, typically played with a mallot, to join the blossoming drumming circle under the loving direction of Lyle Povah. She'd never done it before.

Born of the spirit, is a life lived in the moment, in honest, right relationship with ourselves, with one another, with all of Creation. Want to be born of the Spirit? Pick up a drum. Build a relationship with a child. Re-connect with the one with whom you feel the most ambivalent. Pray for the healing of the world as much as you pray for the mission of this place. Be sacrificial in your giving, until it hurts so much that you feel good.

I love it when movies preach the gospel. In the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, The young hotel owner tells his guest, who had been complaining bitterly, "We have a saying in India, everything will be alright in the end." Then he smiles, melts her anger and says, if everything is not alright, then it must not be the end. There it is, the ushering of the kingdom of God...if everything is not alright...it must not yet be here. To be born of the Spirit sets our intention. Amen.