



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens

Episcopal Visit to St. Oswald's, Port Kells

Lent 2 Year A March 5, 2023

Readings: Genesis 12: 1-4a, Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17, John 3: 1-17

It is a pleasure to be with you at St. Oswald's this morning. This is the first time that I have been to this church and it is a delight to be here. I am grateful for your ministry over many years. I am grateful for the work that Miranda has done here and in other parts of the diocese. She brings with her an infectious energy and an enthusiasm for faith. She will soon be moving from St. Oswald's and I thank her for the work she has done in this place. It is good to be here.

Richard Rohr once wrote: "There are commonly two kinds of human beings: there are people who want certitude and there are people who want understanding; and these two people often cannot understand one another."¹

There is so much truth in this statement especially when it comes to faith and trust in God. For I believe very strongly that human beings crave a deeper, closer relationship and connection with the presence of God. We are searching for intimacy with the holy, with mystery, with wonder, with deep peace. It is in us to search deeper and more carefully for

¹ Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation Daily Meditations from Wednesday, July 19, 2017

this relationship with God but sometimes we are not sure where to search or how to find. We are not always sure where certainty ends and understanding begins. Our gospel passage about Nicodemus coming to Jesus, is about all of this very thing.

It is about that quest, that pilgrimage, that hope of discovering that God is not distant and hidden from our sight and our view. God is not absent and long forgotten. Neither is God an old man in the sky unconnected or uninterested in this world. The incarnation, the birth of God into this world in the person of Jesus Christ, revealed God's intimate and close connection to us and our lives. But for some people it is hard to fathom this deep and abiding presence of God in this world. We like to understand how everything on this planet works so that sometimes we miss noticing the mystery and presence of the holy right in front of us. Or sometimes we place so many definitions around God and dictate how God works that we lose sight of God sneaking into our world and showing up right in the midst of us.

When I read the gospel of John it becomes very clear to me that this image of a more expansive understanding of God is what the authors of John's gospel are trying to portray. There is just so much imagery, so many metaphors, so many different word plays that to look at it from the view that God can only work in certain and predictable ways is completely missing the boat. It carries us from certainty to understanding.

Remember this is the gospel that begins: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And it continued... "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." This is wonderful poetry and evokes an invitation to journey closer to God.

Today we heard about Nicodemus in John's gospel. This is no simple factual story of a man coming to visit Jesus. It too contains metaphors and images and stage settings attempting to draw us nearer to God. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, in the darkness, a place absent of the light, ...the true light. Nicodemus was a leader in his faith community, an important man. He was learned and well respected. He was known in the right circles by the right people. By all accounts he had made it.

But he knew there was something missing, or why would he have come to Jesus in the night? He was searching, he was looking for a deeper and more intimate connection with God and with holiness. He had certainty but wanted understanding. He knew that it was not an intellectual exercise to grow deeper into God's presence but struggled to see it. He was still in the darkness. He had grown up with all the carefully thought out definitions of God, knew the Law inside out and upside down, could quickly respond to anyone willing to

debate him. He loved the categories his faith had created, all was precise, all was clear, all was known and accounted for. But something was missing.

There were gaps in his hope in God, in his trust in God's love and full presence. And so he came to Jesus and said "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." And Jesus plays with his intellect, and says: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus is immediately confused. He does not understand the pun, he just doesn't get it. He wonders how on earth one can enter a second time into the mother's womb. It does not make literal sense. Jesus confuses him even more: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." This is all metaphor needing time and thought to process it and understand, referring to Baptism and being born anew by the water and the Spirit of Baptism, it is about a spiritual awakening. Nicodemus, though, was completely lost. Still in the dark. His searching continued.

In the early Church some of the fonts for Baptism were in the shape of a womb. They represented the new life, the life that Nicodemus was trying desperately to understand but simply could not. The new life that Jesus was talking about was not based on knowledge or categories but a faith based on meeting God anew each day. A faith based on seeing God in a new vibrancy after journeying through the dark night of the soul. A faith based on new life aware of God with us. A faith based on God's hope for us that seeps into all of life and makes us alive in the Spirit. For we discover when we grow in faith that we cannot categorize and completely understand God, our faith is about seeing God's light in our darkness so that we have new life through him.

Virginia Stem Owens writes: "Just as your body grows gradually- and without your direction- inside your mother's womb, your spirit must take shape within God's spirit. When you are born into that kingdom, then you're living God's own life, breathing God's own breath. It becomes your very heartbeat." This is the new life that Jesus was talking about.

Nicodemus was not alone. There are many people who want a simple, organized, pat answer faith. Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark and he left in the dark, he never saw or understood what Jesus was talking about. He was not willing to give up all that he knew and was comfortable with in describing God. He was not willing to think outside the box or be born of the Spirit, born anew and aware of the abiding presence of God. Born anew to discover that God continues to transform and change and make new. He could not make the transition from certainty to understanding. At that time Nicodemus just did not seem to get it.

But the Holy Spirit of God does not only offer but one opportunity to come to a new understanding. The Spirit usually offers countless opportunities. For Nicodemus did eventually come to see things differently. In John's gospel, it is Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who take Jesus' body down from the cross and prepare it for burial. Something changed within him. Perhaps he came to see that Jesus was indeed the light of God in this world. Perhaps he came to see that his darkness had finally lifted. Perhaps he came to see that the presence of God was richer and greater than he could ever have imagined or considered. Perhaps, like us he discovered God's whisper to him to come closer, to draw nearer, to awaken to the spiritual cravings which do not require answers to all our questions but knowledge that indeed God is known to us in our very soul. Perhaps Nicodemus discovered what all of us crave to know, that as he laid that body in the tomb, that the darkness would never overcome God's light and God's hope. May we in our Lenten pilgrimage know that fullness of light and maybe come to new understanding of God's light in this world and how we can be born anew.