

March 8, 2020 2nd Sunday of Lent

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Genesis 12:1-4a, Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

[Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus entitled Where the Wind Blows posted on 3-1-20 (includes reference to Martin Luther and Diana Butler Bass). Jason Mahn in The Christian Century, 2-12-20, Taking Religion to heart: Faith formation in my world religions classroom, page 20ff. The Atlantic's Weekly Email, posted 3-7-20: An Ugly Symptom of Viral Outbreaks, by Yasmeen Serhan.]

Mercy, wide mercy, and holy mystery to you, beloved ones. Amen.

Nicodemus, oh Nicodemus.

This week I've been pondering and praying about this fellow named Nicodemus.

Really, I've been pondering and praying about Nicodemus and Jesus, for it's not just about Nicodemus that we hear about today, but the dialogue, indeed, the relationship between Nicodemus and Jesus.

In all of this, also I've been thinking about a recent article I read by Jason Mahn, a religion professor at Augustana College, an ELCA school in Rock Island, Illinois.

The article is called "Taking Religion to Heart: Faith formation in my world religions classroom".

Professor Mahn describes the questions students bring, like:

"How can I know and worship God in this way

while also studying, respecting, and even admiring those who know God ... differently?"

"How and why can I stand *here*,

while learning about, respecting, and appreciating those who stand *there*?"

He writes about the desire the students have for clear resolution.

With this, he's come to understand his teaching role as "trying to get them to name and endure these tensions and live these questions rather than solve and answer them straightaway."

Nicodemus brings similar big questions and tensions to Jesus under the cover of night.

How can anyone be born after growing old?

How can we think anew once settled in, once established in our ways?

How can these things be?

Nicodemus is such an important figure in John's Gospel, and only in John's gospel, none of the others.

He's is a religious leader, a learned man, a member of the powerful Sanhedrin—the Jewish council.

What courage he must have mustered to approach Jesus that night!

He shows up again a few chapters later, advocating for Jesus to get a hearing, not simply an accusation.

Finally after Jesus is crucified, it's Nicodemus who joins Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus' broken body.

Nicodemus doesn't come empty handed for that task.

Rather he brings a mixture of aloe and myrrh weighing 100 pounds. Oh Nicodemus.

Over the next four Sundays we'll hear a total of four stories from the Gospel of John.

Today it's Nicodemus and Jesus.

Next Sunday Jesus is engaging with the woman at the well.

Then comes Jesus and the man who is born blind.

And finally Jesus raising Lazarus and talking with his sisters, Mary and Martha.

You hear in that list some themes, themes of dialogue and relationship, back and forth, questions.

In that spirit, most weeks we'll hear the gospels in a reader's-theater-of-sorts, for they are all truly dialogues.

They accompany us in dust and in beauty toward Holy Week and Easter.

As an aside: if you're curious about how each of the four gospel writers tell the story, particularly the passion story of Holy Week, remember that a new Bible study has just begun with this focus.

Through history and still today, it's John's gospel that often fuels anti-Semitic hate-talk and violence against the Jewish community.

It's important to acknowledge this and prevent it from continuing.

For John, these stories, Nicodemus and the others: they aren't characterizations, fictional composites, but real characters who bring real questions, real yearning, real decisions.

Knowing this, we can interrogate our own readings of the text.

Why do we so often favor composites, straw characters that can be easily demonized, not the real stories, the real struggles, the real pain?

In the midst of this dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, John 3:16 always surprises me.

How many of you have seen John 3:16 emblazoned on a t-shirt or a key chain or billboard?

Or hanging from the railings at some sporting event?

Martin Luther proclaimed John 3:16 "the heart of the Bible, the Gospel in miniature."

Now days it's a soundbite; plenty of us know it by memory.

In more than a few traditions it's held up as a formula for belief, a litmus test.

I wish we'd remember better the verse that follows, John 3:17: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved..."

God knows there's plenty of condemnation bouncing around our world and communities these days.

Here's that reminder that condemnation isn't the point, but rather love.

Even with John 3:16 in easy reach, isn't it curious that for Nicodemus, nothing is quick, nothing is formulaic, nothing is a memory verse or a pledge of faith or a billboard?

For Nicodemus, like for most of us, faith takes time, often a lifetime.

“How can this be?” he wonders, and when we’re honest, that may be our question too.

Nicodemus isn’t saved that night.

It’s not salvation he finds, but first bewilderment.

It takes dialogue, relationship, heartbreaking, beautiful relationship to birth his salvation.

Having grown up in a more Evangelical tradition that leaned heavily on John 3:16,

heavily on consenting to formulas of belief,

Episcopal Priest Debie Thomas now wonders if maybe God’s way of evangelism

is actually more like Nicodemus’ experiences with Jesus.

It’s baffling, it’s surprising, it’s muddled, it’s rarely quick.

The Spirit “blows where it chooses” Jesus reminds Nicodemus.

It can’t be caged or controlled, or timed, and neither can this journey of healing and salvation.

It’s a mystery, a holy mystery.

Debie Thomas confesses, “For me, this way of believing—this way of defining faith as an intellectual assent to precisely codified doctrines—has fallen apart.”

“Not because I can’t assent, but because my assenting, in and of itself, hasn’t fostered anything close to the meaningful relationship I desire to have with God.”

“If anything,” she continues, “my intellectual assent has functioned as a smokescreen. A distraction. A substitute.”

Historian of Christianity, Diana Butler Bass describes how our English word “believe” comes from the German word “belieben”, actually the word for love.

So believing isn’t about holding an opinion, or consenting to a formula (even a really famous one).

Rather believing is loving, trusting, treasuring, throwing your heart over the fence.

Or lugging 100 pounds of aloe and myrrh to prepare your Savior’s broken body after the political and religious pot has been stirred.

Or like Abram and Sarai in Genesis, risking it all,

leaving country and kin, your father’s house and protection,

every shred of a safety net in that culture and time,

going when you didn’t even know *where* you were going.

That’s love, that’s faith, not a heady, formulaic consent,

but a full-bodied trust in the Spirit that blows where it will.

That’s the beauty in the conversations, truly the love and trust, that Jesus and Nicodemus began that night.

Before I wrap up, let me say a word about anxiety.

This week I'm acutely aware of the anxiety in the air.

Tornados in Tennessee.

Presidential primary elections.

The spread of the Corona Virus, Covid 19, and all that feels up in the air because of it.

As a community of faith, we'll keep heeding the wisdom of the CDC, keep staying alert, keep washing hands, keep protecting the most vulnerable.

As we share the peace, try those elbow bumps or other gestures of peace, try looking one another in the eye with love, that counts!

Our congregational leaders and staff will stay in touch and communicate if we need to further adjust our ways of being church.

Anxiety and fear... they have a way of making our thinking rigid, clenching our grip, stirring our fears, and isolating us.

I invite you to join me in intentionally finding other ways to connect, especially with those most vulnerable—phone calls, texts, notes.

Anxiety also breeds xenophobia, and it's important to be aware of that often unconscious response.

In The Atlantic Weekly, Brian Wong, a Rhoades Scholar from Hong Kong currently studying in the U.K. reported:

"If you are seen to be Asian...even if you are not coughing or displaying symptoms, people naturally walk away from you."

What is the good news I hear today?

It's verses that remind us that Jesus did not come to condemn, but to save, literally to heal.

That... God's love for the world and for you and for me is so strong, so deep, deep unto death, strong into life.

So often we're tempted by quick faith or easy answers.

I hear in the conversation that Nicodemus and Jesus share, a wideness, a spaciousness, to keep asking the questions, to take it slow, to stay in relationship, to let mercy, grace, carry us.

The Spirit's wind blows, Jesus knows this, he knows it well, and he trusts it.

Would you pray with me? Gracious God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown.

Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ. Amen.