

March 8, 2020 Second Sunday in Lent
Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan
Peace Lutheran Church - Austin, Texas

HOLY GOSPEL

John 3:1-17

The holy gospel, according to Saint John, the third chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

1Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." 3Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What 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." 9Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

11"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

First, I would like to offer a word for the sake of this whole community, some of whom those of us in this room cannot see.

Of course, it is always true that our physical gathering
 is only one part of the gathered church...
 one corner of God's kin-do in one moment in time.

But in these weeks,
 we may find ourselves gathering in more invisible ways.
 So, to those who are watching from a distance, grace and peace to you.
 You are an important part of this community.

Please feel free to use the comment thread on facebook
 for conversation and fellowship
 if that is how you are participating in right now.

It's a new thing we are undertaking –
 how to be community from a distance...
 as we try to stop the spread of illness.

But...after all...our God is all about new things.
 All the time, it seems.

So, new things are fitting today,
 and we will continue to work to be a loving community
 through whatever comes.

And, it fits with the words we hear from Scripture today, as well.
 God is so often in the business of calling us
 beyond what we know and where we are comfortable.

Perhaps, if we all could sing like Idina Menzel
 we could change the hymn of the day
 to Frozen's II's "Into the Unkown..."
 because today we have heard in Scripture
 how that is exactly where God called two different men
 in two very different times.

Abram...the beginning of the great family chosen by God...
 receives this almost perfunctory divine message
 "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house
 to the land that I will show you."

And Abram...just...does...or so it seems.

It's hard to imagine...

and even harder if you know that Abram's family

had already left the city of his birth - the great city of Ur -

and had travelled along the great river Euphrates to settle in Haran.

But now...with this command...

God was telling Abram to leave his family and safety behind...

including the safety of the river,

which gave them water and a path to follow...

instead to head out into the desert.

It is at this point that I completely fail to be able to identify with Abram.

How?

How did he do that?

And so, I am grateful for the other man called into the unknown this week.

Nicodemus...I feel like I can identify with Nicodemus...

who feels the pull of God's call,

but isn't ready yet to march out into the desert

and leave everything behind.

He is a leader among his people, a teacher, and an authority...

but he is finding himself questioning what he knows...

or thinks he knows. And he goes to Jesus to try to understand.

He goes under the cover of darkness...

wrapped in the velvet privacy of nighttime.

I don't know about you...

but there is something different about the darkness and stillness of night.

When the background noise dies down,

and the harshness of daylight is gone...

and the edges of things soften...sometimes fear comes...

but so also can our deepest wonderings...

and maybe even some of our deepest hopes.

Nicodemus can tell that the world is changing with Jesus,
that God is doing a new thing, but he doesn't get it.

And Jesus tells him more...and he still doesn't get it.
Perhaps underneath his question, "How can someone be born again?"
is an implied, "Why would anyone want to be?"
Why would I want to go back to knowing so little
and being dependent for so much?

If the idea of being born again isn't unappealing enough to you,
Maybe ask yourself if you would want to relive 7th grade? or 2nd?
or whichever year or years were full of the pain
of losing innocence and safety and confidence?

Why would we want to do that again Jesus?

We're on an upward trajectory...
We're figuring it out...Why would we want to go backwards?

And yet, Jesus points out over and over again
how the little children are the ones
who know how to live in the kingdom of heaven.
Maybe we're not on as much of an upward trajectory as we like to think.

Nicodemus doesn't get it.

And by the time we come to the end of our reading today...
he still doesn't get it.

And yet, in the midst of his confusion and his earnest seeking...

Jesus offers one of the greatest and most memorized gospel words
in all of Scripture:

For God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten son,
so that all who believe in him might not perish but may have eternal life.
God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.

That's not good news that depends upon our understanding.

God loves us...and every particle of creation...
so God steps down into the world to save it.
Not to condemn...but to save.

Nicodemus doesn't get it yet. Neither do we.

And yet...the promise is still for us.

And if you watch very closely,
you might see in Nicodemus what can begin to happen
when we receive the promises of God.
Because he actually shows up again - two more times.

The next time, the plot to arrest and kill Jesus is growing,
and many people who believed in him were keeping their heads down
because they were afraid of what might happen.

But Nicodemus stands up among his peers,
among the leaders (some of whom were plotting against Jesus)
and demanded a fair hearing for him...

He doesn't exactly defend him...but he pushes back...
which was a dangerous thing to do.

He goes from hiding in the darkness
to taking a bold stand in broad daylight.

But that's it. It's a moment, and it's over.

Until...finally, he appears a third and final time,
after Jesus has been crucified.

He has gone from secret questioner,
to moderate defender,
to loving follower...

because he is among the few people who tend to Jesus' body...
bringing hugely expensive amount of myrrh and burial spices.

Jesus so loved Nicodemus...

before Nicodemus had learned to love him...
that he gave himself for him...

and Nicodemus did learn...
and he couldn't have done so if Jesus hadn't loved him first.

Probably none of us can.

And because we receive God's love,
we become able to offer it back to God and to others.

Like Abram,
who was chosen before he had done anything
to earn the place as the father and ancestor of us all.
But God came close to him and told him,
"I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing..."

So, in a few moments,
we will have the joy of seeing this promise come true
in a particular way within our community,
as we commission Martha Levine as a new Stephen Minister,
having just completed her training.

Blessed to be a blessing in her new work.

May you know you are held within the great love of God –
no matter what you feel or know or need today.
May you receive courage as you are called into the unknown.

And may you be blessed.

And may you be a blessing...

Thanks be to God. Amen.