

Sermon for March 14, 2021

John 3: 1-17

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There are many different ways that someone can understand the life of faith. When looking at what it means to believe, to struggle, to wrestle with God throughout one's lifetime, many different metaphors can come to mind. There are famous ones – that life is like a walk on the beach – the “footprints in the sand metaphor” – where sometimes we see two sets of footprints and other times one, because at times God carries us when life gets difficult. That is one way of understanding the life of faith. This week, as the weather warmed and I was with my kids out in our backyard, I thought of another one as I pushed my youngest – Mae – on a swing. Maybe, I thought, the life of faith is like being pushed in a swing. There are moments of pure elation and joy, where you feel freedom and boundless possibility and then there are moments where life is more difficult and you need that gentle, subtle “push” of support from God to get you back to up again. That is another way of understanding the life of faith.

The one we often talk about is that the life of faith is a journey – not on a beach, but along the so called “road of life”. On this journey, we sometimes find ourselves in crystal clear moments of joy and clarity and understanding, while in other moments we literally find ourselves in the dark. We struggle to know what to believe, we struggle to see God's presence alongside us; we shift into a faith that is rooted less in sight and proof and clarity, and more in trust, yearning, and above all – hope.

This is where we find Nicodemus today in our text. He has been walking the journey of faith his whole life long. He is prominent – a Pharisee and teacher to his community. He is devoted, committed, highly regarded by the people around him. And yet, he is curious. He wants to know more. So he arranges to meet with Jesus...not in “the light of day”, where literally he could be caught and found out, but more metaphorically in the night, where the yearning he feels, where the hope he feels can find connection.

If our first instinct is to be suspicious of Nicodemus for seeking out Jesus in the dark, it may do us well to check where we are on our spiritual journeys. Dr. Deborah Kapp, Professor of Urban Ministry at McCormick Seminary writes that “if any character in the Bible can be regarded as representative of the 21st Century church member, it might be Nicodemus.” She writes, “Nicodemus is successful and confident, plays a leadership role in his community, is open and curious and committed, and yet...he is not ready to go public with his faith.” She continues, “for two centuries the brand of mainline Protestantism has encouraged restraint, tolerance, and personal morality, and all are worthy virtues.” But, she suggests, such virtues keep one's faith safely in the dark; safely private and personal, like the silent prayers offered to God at bedtime. What Jesus tells Nicodemus, and perhaps subsequently us – the church – is that such a faith is simply too small. It is incomplete, immature. It is like a child still safe in its mother's womb, still gestating, Jesus implies. And what needs to happen, what *must happen* to truly be in this discipleship journey, is that that faith must be born into the light of day.

You must be born from above, Jesus says. It is not so much a command, as we often hear it. But more of a pastoral recommendation, or better yet – an invitation – to let God work in his life. To let

God work within and alongside Nicodemus, birthing him from a private faith in the night to an embodied faith lived out in the day.

Or, if we think of the modern 21st century church, birthing us from polite, restrained faith that is kept to ourselves to a whole-hearted, flesh and blood kind of faith where each and every step, each and every action represents a step on that journey of faith lived, with hope, in the light of day.

This third chapter of John has some of the “greatest hits” of Christianity packed into its 17 verses. This is where the idea of being “born again” comes from. It’s where John 3:16 – that verse that some claim is a summation of Christian belief – comes from. So much is here. And yet, we’re left wondering: what ultimately happens to Nicodemus?

Well...we get the sense that, pretty much, he went back to his life as a Pharisee. We don’t hear about him joining with the disciples in their journeys with Jesus. We don’t get the impression that he is immediately “born again” following this very real encounter with Jesus.

But we do hear about him two more times in the Gospel of John. In one instance, in chapter 7, Nicodemus is coming to Jesus’ defense in the midst of some intense conflict between Jesus and his friends – the Pharisees, the religious authorities. Even if he sounds scared and hesitant, and maybe a little lukewarm, we see Nicodemus trying to defend Jesus. And then later, after Jesus’ death, we learn that it is Nicodemus and his friend Joseph of Arimathea – a man described as a *secret disciple of Jesus* – that take Jesus’ body to its burial place. And Nicodemus, this lukewarm, nighttime disciple, is the one who brought spices for the body. For anointing. Can you imagine? That this nighttime, lukewarm seeker would be the one to provide such intimate care for Jesus?

Could *that* represent Nicodemus finally coming into the light? Finally allowing God to birth his faith from hesitant and lukewarm in the night to wholehearted and embodied in the light of day?

It’s hard to say.

But that is typical of the gospel of John. You see, despite so many of those “greatest hits” from today’s reading, the gospel of John is not ultimately about creating a litmus test for whether someone is a Christian or not. Dr. Karoline Lewis, who is an ardent lover of this Gospel of John, suggests that that’s not how John’s gospel understands faith. It is not a “be born again or else” kind of text.

She writes, instead, that in the gospel of John, “faith” is never a noun. “Belief” is always a verb. Do you hear that? Faith and belief is never something someone one can have or possess, according to John. It is not a destination you can arrive at. Instead, it is always a journey. It is always an ongoing process. Like walking on a beach or being pushed on a swing or traveling along the road of faith. Lewis says, in [John’s gospel}, believing is always subject to all of the ambiguity, uncertainty, and indecisiveness of being human. Because...and hear this, if nothing else...having an incarnate God necessitates an incarnational faith, meaning believing is just as complicated as being human. Period.”

Which means that faith – belief – life, is an on-going journey. It is a process, a constant unveiling and uncovering, through valleys and hillsides, in the light of day and the dark of night. It is a journey, and what matters is not the destination – not that we arrive at some crystal clear, born again, Damascus road kind of faith – but that we open ourselves, that we allow ourselves to encounter God along the way. To be reborn, again and again and again, to what God is doing in our lives.

Friends, how many of us are like Nicodemus in our faith, searching and curious, faithful and maybe a little afraid to come out to the light of day? This day, may we hear this good news – that the God who meets us in our journey – whether by day or by night – is eager to help us find new life, rebirth – along the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.