

“Borne Again”

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Reading: John 3.1- 17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He 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.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus 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?’ Jesus answered, ‘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. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The 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 said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

‘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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

‘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.

‘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.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

In the Christian year, the season of Lent is a quiet time, a time of increased devotional practice, and focus on the person of Jesus. After the *Son et Lumiere* quality of the Transfiguration two weeks ago, and then the triumph of Jesus' clever debate with Satan in the desert last week, we follow him now into encounters of a much more intimate kind. There is a turn inward, as the great story of our faith moves inexorably toward the cross. Collectively and as individuals, Lent calls us to introspection.

But, for a number of reasons, that inward turn isn't easy to sustain. Part of the difficulty is just our extraverted United Church-ish way of being. It's not just Bloor Street, more of a liberal Protestant thing. We are outward looking and active. It's much easier and feels more natural for us to say, hey let's have a pancake supper or a community café, or get together a group to call on our member of parliament or go to Nicole's play or the Little Opera for Little Babies, than it is to say, let's be contemplative. We don't even have monks in the United Church. Think of that, what does that say about us?

Another aspect of our reluctance is related to the material we turn to when we do sit still. Some of our most famous and beloved Bible passages carry with them what can only be called a cringe factor, and that is the case today. We derail when we encounter language which has been used to exclude, or which evokes a picture of faith we cannot share, perhaps even find repugnant. As in, are you born again? Are you or aren't you a real Christian, in or out? But from another side too, we sometimes hear a sneer, oh, those born-again, as if it means they never think.

Then John 3.16. *For God so loved the world...* Absolutely central to Christian spirituality. But wearing it on a football helmet (or your eye black as in the Superbowl commercial, or pant clips from Christianbiker.com)? That's the cringe factor. Chuck picked up on this difficulty in his Lenten Reflection on Thursday. It takes work to reclaim our sense of the generosity and clarity of these words, in a world that is justifiably dubious about the value of religion. Sometimes when we attempt a quiet walk along the path of faith we find we are toiling against a stiff breeze.

A third factor which may deter us from turning to the inner life is the sheer overwhelming immediacy of the outer life. Quite apart from whatever may be happening in our own lives and relationships, our busy-ness and our preoccupations, lately we have been focused as a global community on extreme events in the world. Over the past two months we have been riveted by the protests and uprisings in Egypt, the Maghreb and Persian Gulf. We are engrossed by the unfolding of a drama whose outcome is entirely uncertain. And since March 11, the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, followed by the rising anxiety over the status of the nuclear reactors at Fukushima Daiichi, the world has watched with baited breath. Which way will the wind blow the radiation? And what will become of it then? The power which the cosmos can release is revealed as genuinely unfathomable. Things change in ways we cannot anticipate. There is always news, but just now it seems harder to turn away from the TV set.

Meditate? Contemplate? Pray? A Lenten discipline? In principle, of course, yes, but really, it's not in our nature, it's off-putting and there is too much else going on. In practice, for all these reasons, perhaps very challenging. If we wish to follow the Lenten path it will have to be done in a way that recognizes the countervailing influences.

Nicodemus is probably not such a bad example of how to do this. We think of him as a small man, going about secretly, quietly asking his questions in the night. We see his tremendous modesty, his deference to Jesus as teacher and one who 'performs signs'. We hear his willingness to expose his own confusion. *How can anyone be born after having grown old?* And then after he gets the answer, *How can this be?* Not really a stupid question, though Jesus teases him for it.

We catch a glimpse of him, open and humble, in this private moment with Jesus. But in his day job, Nicodemus is very different. He is a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin – the judicial council that governed the life of the Jews in Roman Palestine. Well educated, competent, influential. He understands the balancing act between keeping the Roman authorities happy and meeting the needs of the people. He knows perfectly well how to walk the narrow path of *realpolitick*. But Jesus receives him as a

seeker – doesn't send him back to the corridors of power with instructions for social change or economic justice. Jesus addresses the part of him that may be more like us – wanting to undertake a richer spiritual journey, but not just sure how. Jesus turns Nicodemus' attention away from what he knows to consider the strangeness of a larger reality.

You won't be in charge, he says. This is something that happens *to* you. You'll be as helpless as an infant in the birth canal. Then he changes the metaphor. Being born of Spirit is like being borne on the wind. Here's what you'll know about what is going on – not much. You may hear the sound of it, may experience it, but you won't know where it came from, or where it is going. This wind of God's Spirit will bring you into a new life. It will carry you. If you can give yourself over to the power of it you will be borne along into new places and relationships and ways of living. Your life will be made whole.

One of our lectionary groups has a couple of very good sailors in it. They told us that the sailor's main task is to watch for the wind, to be alert to its gusts and lulls. Ideally, the sailor will respond in ways that work with nature so that expertise and mystery are united. With the right combination of skill and surrender, the boat will almost fly. But to proceed in the desired direction, the strategy may require tacking in what seems to be a zig-zag path. What Jesus is telling Nicodemus, and in turn telling us, is to pay attention to the pushes and pulls of the Spirit, as we are borne along the Lenten path. A gentle breeze of friendship here, a chilly blast of anxiety from the newspaper there, a gust of interest in a new idea, the zephyr of delight from music or art, the lull of total silence when we recognize love. It's true, we do not know where they come from or where they may lead us, but Jesus says to us that it is these moments – this wind, this breath of God, this Spirit – on which we are borne into new life.

When he turns from Nicodemus to the assembled disciples, Jesus sees that they are all shaking their heads. They are with Nicodemus, wondering, *How can this be?* Perhaps we are too. So this time, Jesus, goes straight to the heart of it, the reason for it. The reason for all this – the wind and new life and the Lenten journey to the cross, is

that God loves the world. God so loves the world, Jesus tells us, that God sent the Son. Sent the Son not to condemn the world, but to save it, so that the world, and we, might be made whole.

Thanks be to God. Amen.