

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent

Sermon 3.12.17

Scripture:

**Genesis 12:1-4**

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

**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."

Before I left for Colorado a couple weeks ago, I told Hannah and Adam I was going to be gone at the time they were due to give birth. "I know," Hannah said.

"Try to wait," I said. "Or do it early."

"I'll try," she said, laughing — both of us laughing.

The joke, of course, is that we have no control over these things. Birth happens on someone else's schedule or *something* else's schedule, though even of that we can't say much. We don't actually know what the determinants of this quite determinative event are. It's not a simple matter of time — nine months exactly, or forty weeks exactly. It's not the baby's size relative to the mother, or the baby's size relative to the womb or amniotic sac. It's not a

matter of having had Chinese food just prior, or something spicy; or having gone on a long walk. It's not even a specific order of events—first the water breaks, then the dilation begins, then come contractions. All of these can happen in any order. Really, every birth is different, from what I gather—such that, when seeking advice for how to proceed with things, an expectant patient or pair of patients will get as much advice as doctors asked. Induce, don't induce; come to the hospital, stay home a little longer; you're exhausted so maybe you should get an epidural, too late for an epidural—this baby is *coming*. No one *really* knows.

In short, birth is a mess. For something that so obviously and persistently has happened to us all, happens everyday and has for time immemorial, it's a total, unpredictable, mess. So, why we think being born again would be otherwise has always puzzled me.

And I don't think that's taking the metaphor too far. I don't think it's taking the metaphor of birth too far to suspect the thing of which Jesus spoke is subject to just this sort of mysterious timing and process as actual childbirth; and therefore a thing that insists upon surrender from us. So, why some Christians speak of being born again, being born from above or from before, as if it were a decision each of us must make (or else...), as if it were an act of will that a person undertakes, determination (instead of an act of grace that is done *to* us, or *amidst* or *among* us, and sometimes in spite of us) has always struck me as missing the point.

Surrender.

That it's a *Pharisee* who elicits this bizarre insight from Jesus is important. Pharisees were religious authorities whose specialty was the Law, the Torah—its six hundred thirteen commandments and their application in daily living. We church people have cast them as the bad guys. The ones who most frequently antagonize Jesus, the ones whom Jesus most frequently goes up against, the Pharisees are easy to understand as simply operating with bad intent. But I don't see it so simply as that. Maybe because I am one—a “religious authority,” or maybe because, as a human being, I've known lots of other human beings and I've found that none of them have been so simple in their motives or aims as to be exclusively cast as bad, I hesitate to cast these guys as bad—neither as individuals and still less as a group. Rare is the group that can really operate as a monolith.

Would that this were the case, though, right? It would really clear up a lot of confusion. If some people were simply bad people and we knew which ones they were, if they plainly identified themselves so we could deal with them appropriately, that would really help

us out. (And notice I say “they” and “them” — because such a thing couldn’t possibly involve me. If there were bad people, plain and simple, I of course wouldn’t be one of them. I’m good.)

I like to credit the Pharisees as each and any human should be credited — as mostly good most of the time, or at least well-intended most of the time. The Pharisees were tasked with a complex set of duties — they were lawyers, preachers, police officers, and public health officials all rolled into one. It was theirs to interpret the Law (the Law as given by God to the people) and to help people live in obedience to it (this Law by which the people could live together peaceably and coherently). It was also theirs to determine who had to be excluded from public life, and for how long (for things as mundane as skin blemishes and diseases, for things as ritually powerful as menstrual cycles, and for things as dangerous a violent criminality) lest a contagion be let loose and set the whole community at risk. This was *important* work and I tend to believe that most of those engaged in it were serious about it. Yes, some probably just loved the power. Okay, a few maybe enjoyed being punitive toward their fellow human beings. But most, I like to think, meant well.

As for Nicodemus, we can read him in a couple of ways. We can read him as questioning Jesus with the intent of mocking him or “testing” him. We can take him as not actually wanting to know the answers to the questions he asked. (“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”) Or we can read him as sincerely curious, sincerely mystified.

What Jesus had to say is pretty mystifying, after all.

So, let’s think it through.

He came to Jesus at night, and this suggests that he knew he wasn’t meant to do this, and perhaps he worried he might be called to account for doing this, disciplined in some way if he were found out. To seek instruction from someone with no proper authority, after all; to be yourself an authorized teacher of some specific and revered body of knowledge, and then to seek guidance from someone outside that authorizing frame: this could be something Nicodemus did at risk to himself. And this likely means he was motivated by sincerity not cynicism.

When someone puts their own wellbeing and good standing at risk, you can bet they’re motivated by sincerity — or desperation.

As to why it matters, *why* it matters (to me, at least) whether Nicodemus was a cynic or was sincere, these days that's about all that matters (to me at least).

Last week, both the serpent in the garden and the voice in the wilderness that tested Jesus had us reflecting on the tricky task of discerning to what and whom we should listen and respond. What and who deserve our attention and consideration? What conversations are we to have, and which are to walk away from? What interactions are we to engage in and which are we wiser to let go?

It's an on-going question, and it's complicated by the also on-going fact that there's more to consider considering these days than ever before. The voices to which we have access are growing exponentially with each passing day. The technology that delivers us "content" is like kudzu or the Asiatic bittersweet that we labored to strip off the trees in the parsonage yard last spring—it's rife and spreading.

There's just so much to take in that the question as to which and how much is a pressing one, a daily one. I sometimes feel like my mind has been stretched out of shape, and violently, so much is there to attend to; I've also been feeling that, in order to keep my mind healthy, I need not subject to such strain without letting it recover. And this is new to me. Don't get me wrong, I've taxed my mind before. Phillips Exeter was nothing if not academic overload; and I sort of loved it. Divinity School, with its focus on "Holy Writ," involves a *lot* of reading, and of things that can only be considered well if considered deeply. But I don't think I've ever felt like this before, the demands on my mind, the demands of keeping up.

So, what to consider and what to let go?

This week, Nicodemus puts a different emphasis on the same question. So much of our discourse these days seems intended mere to provoke, to tick someone else off. It's not just that there is so much going on; it's also the manner in which we keep it all going. I suspect the Internet and social media have something to do with. These enable engaging people who otherwise have no relationship with one another—to say nothing of affection or fondness or even appreciation. We bear no responsibility for the other, and aren't accountable to what harm we might do.

We hurl heavy, freighted words at one another as if it doesn't matter, as if none of it matters, as if this is the free expression the Constitutional framers had in mind and anything less than sounding off all the time amounts to political oppression, psychological repression, or

a failure to be appropriately outraged or offended—as if the abuse of words won't have far more detrimental effect, as if, intending to tick off and enflame, we aren't actually risking something yet worse, that nothing will mean anything and everything will mean nothing.

By the end of the day sometimes, this is how I feel: we've decided that nothing means anything and everything means nothing.

For the sake of not slipping into this abyss, then, I hear Nicodemus as genuine, as sincere. "How can this be that someone can be born after having grown old?"

It makes sense that he would take such a literal tack. As a lawyer for God's sake, he was likely practiced in the discipline of exactitude; he was likely of a frame of mind that was delineated and clear. But now what was asked of him by this teacher who's come from God is an openness to something as unclear and mysterious as the wind—and not just an openness to it but a willingness to be brought along on the wind's journey as it blows where it chooses, coming from we-know-not-where and going back to that place, for "so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

I imagine the experience being asked of Nicodemus is similar to the experience Abraham is said to have undergone. Called out of his country, and away from his kindred and his father's house, Abraham might have felt this as disruptive to a degree that we can hardly imagine it. Scholarship isn't settled on how far ancient humans tended to travel from home. Some say not far at all, others say farther than we ever supposed. But either way, a call to leave the familiar and to set out for the unexpected is a disruption. Even the most planned journeys can be. The change in routine, a change in climate or language, a change in the assumptions upon which we each and all build our lives, being away from the "holding environment" that most of us have, these which help us understand who we are: to be called out and away is an act of faith and risk, an act of surrender in the hope of grace.

I bet Pharisees, as with many people, enjoyed the world as they could manage it. This might be what would make someone aim to become a Pharisee in the first place. Knowing what needs to be done and then doing it, knowing what others should do and then enforcing their doing it, holding the big organization picture in mind: there's something to be said for such managerial clarity. As someone who does not have that capacity, I admire it in those who do.

It's just that it's not going to get you into the kingdom of God.

That sounds condemning. I don't mean it that way, because I don't feel it that way.

A funny thing's been happening for me in worship these days. More and more I go home on Sundays *tired*. Like I've done something strenuous, but it's my mind and not my body that's fatigued, worship has more and more left me feeling fatigued. But I realize it's a different fatigue than the one the world besets. It's the difference between irrigation and flooding. It's the difference between reading books and reading tweets. It's the difference between walking my dogs in the woods and rowing a sprint at a regatta. It's the difference between doing yoga and being a contestant on Supermarket Sweep. To worship is to be attentive, but attentive to the very thing that created and sustains us, and so comes to us in such a way that we can meet and even manage, yet that also is just beyond where our minds and faith are right now and so is ever calling us *out*.

The framework that religious organization holds in place is a crucial part of this. The framework that the likes of Nicodemus provided the people was a crucial part of that people's living witness. The framework that deacons and councils, bishops and popes, scholars and theologians, conference ministers and senior pastors, have for millennia maintained and managed, are a crucial part of our safely and faithfully going out of our minds on a weekly basis. These just aren't the chief aim and end. That would be the kingdom of God, and for that we need to go out of our minds.

Nicodemus seems to have gotten being gotten. Given that he shows up two more times in the story of Jesus, Nicodemus seems to have obeyed the un-commandment of being born of the Spirit—carried into new life as if on the wind. Consider, it's Nicodemus who squared off with some other Pharisees, these who were angry at the Temple police for not arresting Jesus when they had the chance. It was Nicodemus who pointed out to them that the Law requires there to be just cause before arresting someone. Consider, too, it's Nicodemus who came to the cross along with Joseph of Arimathea, to help cut Jesus' body down and prepare it for burial. And it's this, of course, that such surrender and entry into the kingdom of God will lead us: to the cross, the cross of self-giving love.

This is the thing by which God doesn't condemn the world but saves the world—by taking the violence of the world unto Himself that we might not be subsumed by it but lifted above it, everyone of us, until there's no one left enthralled to violence, no one left enthralled to death. And the sooner we come to see, as John's gospel insists upon inviting us (“Come and

see.”); the sooner we come to believe in Jesus, as John’s gospel insists we are to do—to believe that God is the crucified one and so that way of God in the world is self-giving, a pouring out; the sooner we understand *this* as the way and nature of God—this and not so many other things that have been said of God: the sooner then that we will be children of God’s realm. The sooner we surrender the logic of this world—that might makes right, that vengeance is *mine*, that power is for its own sake, that I must win every encounter and every exchange; the sooner we lay down the logic of this world to be taken up into theo-logic that is God’s forgiveness and grace, God’s self-giving that we all might win: the sooner we will be full participants and subjects in God’s reign.

We gather here in this funny, beautiful box of a room to practice a frameless frame of mind. We gather in this timber frame container to achieve an unset mindset, a birthing from above and beyond what clamor the world besets upon us. Both demand attention—the world and the Spirit. Both stretch and strain and even exhaust. The Spirit, though, in my experience, also fills and fulfills. If that’s not your experience (yet), give it time. Being born doesn’t happen as we would have it happen. But it does happen.

Thanks be to God.