

Lent 2 (John 3:1-17)

Vv. 1-3: What are the things you hold in darkness that keep you from being born from above?

Vv. 4-6: How do you nurture your fleshly birth, and how do you nurture your spiritual birth?

Vv. 7-12: How does what you hold in darkness keep you from birth in the freedom of the Spirit?

Vv. 13-7:

In John's Gospel, this conversation does not end. It is not even clear when Jesus stops speaking and the narrator takes over. Nicodemus is the author's depiction of those who, on the verge of transformation, while still confused, need to know that their interaction with hope and new life is not yet complete, that they are not condemned, even while not yet fully alive. The birth from above is not yet carried to full term; the breeze is not yet stirring.

When have you also found yourself in that state of uncondemned dark waiting? How have you cared for others who find themselves there? How do you love the world so that the world will have life?

The Gospel for the Second Sunday in Lent is the story of Nicodemus.

John always writes at more than one level; symbolism and irony suffuse his Gospel.

Nicodemus comes to see Jesus by night. His entire conversation with Jesus is a struggle to “see” what Jesus is saying, and he appears to remain in the dark the whole time. Jesus finally asks Nicodemus, “Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”

Part of Nicodemus’ confusion is understandable. It arises from two Greek words that Jesus uses with double meanings. “*Pneuma*” means both “wind” and “spirit.” “*Anothen*” means both “anew” and “from above.” Such confusions are how John forces his readers to watch themselves misunderstand and slowly reach understanding.

Nicodemus’ reference points are all physical: he thinks Jesus must mean to be born “again,” because bodily birth is the only kind of birth he can conceive (though he cannot conceive—but do I mean “cannot become pregnant” or “cannot comprehend?”). Jesus doesn’t help when he suggests that one can be born of the wind (I don’t mean “borne by the wind”). Most translators, busy in their support of Trinitarian theology, use the word “spirit.” But “wind,” which “blows where it chooses,” seems better to fit the strangeness of this conversation, with Jesus’ abrupt shifts in direction. And to be born “from above” seems a better fit with Jesus’ references later to the descending of the Son of Man; the one speaking to Nicodemus is the Incarnate Word, the first one to be “born from above”—but how could Nicodemus know that? It is not surprising that Nicodemus can’t follow Jesus (but do I mean he can’t “understand what he is saying” or can’t “become his disciple”?).

All in all, this seems a gentle conversation. There are no quotation marks in the Greek text, so we cannot know where Jesus stops talking and the narrator of the Gospel takes over with commentary. Perhaps we are meant to believe that Nicodemus heard Jesus say that God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world.

Somehow this conversation, that seems so out of step, is the beginning of transformation for Nicodemus. When we see Nicodemus later in the Gospel, he defends Jesus in the face of the hostile Pharisees (John 7:47-52), and he courageously joins Joseph of Arimathea to collect Jesus’ body from the cross and to bury it, bringing “myrrh and aloes weighing about a hundred pounds” for the embalming (John 19:39-40).

As you reflect on this Gospel, recall times that you were in a conversation that you knew mattered to you, but that you had a hard time understanding. How did insight dawn?

What was necessary for you to do to arrive at an understanding of the other person? If the conversation remains puzzling to you still, what have you done with that memory? When the other person is God, how do we come to understand what God is inviting us into?