

**March 5, 2023**

**Second Sunday of Lent**

**How do we begin again?**

**John 3:1-17**

**3** Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2** 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 unless God is with that person." **3** Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." **4** 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?" **5** Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. **6** What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' **8** 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." **9** Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" **10** Jesus answered him, "Are you the 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. **12** If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? **13** No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. **14** And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that 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.

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

I was born again in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, at the foot of the cross. It happened at the Lutheran Bible camp I attended with my cousin, Ruth. With quivering voice, I prayed the sinner's prayer. It truly was a turning point in my life. I suddenly felt like I belonged. I was "in!"

I attended that camp six more times as a camper and worked there five full summers. I learned every song, attended every study, I looked up to the college-aged counselors. I wanted to be spiritual and pure, just like they were. Some of those illusions fell by the wayside when I started working at the camp and saw behind the curtain. Even then, I soaked up every word.

I don't begrudge how I came to Jesus. I learned so much at that camp and it gave me an experience that was different from the Disciples church I attended back home. And it gave me a sense of certainty and comfort.

The gift I received at that camp was both curse and blessing. It was God in a box. "Here's what you are supposed to believe," all wrapped up with a bow. And rather than teaching me how to think and be curious, they taught me what to think. Then they taught me to be wary and/or condemning of anything that didn't fit in that box.

I am a PK, which in my case stands for plumber's kid. My mother was a secretary. I didn't grow up with people who had degrees in religion. So, when I signed up for my first and only religion class at Iowa State University, imagine my shock when the professor didn't affirm everything I had in my box. "He's not even a Christian," I told people, not knowing for sure if he claimed to be or not. "How can he teach about Jesus and Christianity?"

I remember being disturbed and perturbed most of the semester. None of what he was teaching aligned with what I believed, about the Bible, about Jesus, about salvation. None of it fit in my box. I remember very little about the content of the class, but I do remember that he was very concerned about US involvement in Central America and the bulk of the class grade was tied to one paper on that topic.

I knew, as Christians, we are supposed to care about people around the world and help where we can, but social justice was not in my box. It was political and social, and very different from my very personal God. And yet, I must have resonated with what he was teaching because I got an A+ on my paper. It made perfect sense to me, but it was outside my box, and I didn't know how to reconcile what he was saying with what I thought was the right and only way to believe.

Fast forward to seminary. Within the first few weeks of my seminary education, the box was starting to strain at the joints. It was the first time I had ever been forced to reconsider what was in the box. I didn't have the safety of anonymity and distance, our classes were small and intimate. The professors knew me. Quite suddenly, the things I once thought were absolute and foundational were called into question, and the box blew apart. The security of that certitude was gone. And I wondered how I could ever be a minister if I didn't know what I believed.

I found myself in the position of having to start over. I had to re-examine the faith that was handed to me, by loving, well-intentioned people. And so began my process of being born again.

That was a long time ago and, in ways big and small, I have experienced that cycle of death and rebirth numerous times.

I am very grateful for my seminary experience. Many people never experience a safe place to doubt and question the faith they have inherited. Some defend their box by calling any challenge a threat or heresy. There are some who make defending their box their religion.

Sometimes, a life experience or educational experience will create an internal conflict with what is in the box. It could be a scientific discovery, like learning that people don't choose their sexuality, or that gender is a social convention. Having a child come out to you can create a huge conflict if you have always believed that to be a sin. Learning how the Bible came to be and was canonized and translated can create conflict if you believe the Bible is literally factually true. Learning about the pervasiveness of racism and Christian nationalism can create a conflict if you have been taught that white Christians are God's chosen people.

When these conflicts happen, some people double down on defending their box – and others open themselves to the possibility of rebirth.

For those who have a well-defended box, these beliefs are so foundational in some expressions of Christianity, to question them is tantamount to experiencing a personal death. You can be excommunicated, lose your family, or become a perpetual prayer concern for those who still hold out hope that you will come around. In some communities, doubting, questioning, and exploring non-approved sources will get you shut down and rejected.

And yet, right there in the gospel of John, we meet someone who is starting to question what he "knows." He has a box. I don't fault him for that. He's a Pharisee, that's his job. He is an expert in the law, and he presumes to **know** what it is to be a faithful follower of the law. But Jesus stirred up an internal conflict in Nicodemus. Jesus doesn't fit in his box, and yet he knows that Jesus couldn't do what he is doing apart from God. Instead of judging Jesus outright, he decides to get curious.

I applaud him for going to Jesus. The fact that he goes under the cover of darkness tells us that the stakes are high for him. The darkness of night is also symbolic in the Gospel of John, Nicodemus is figuratively in the dark.

"Open the box," Jesus tells him. Instead of clinging to what you think you know, open yourself up to the Spirit, let your certitude die. Be born again. God didn't send the son to condemn everyone outside your box. God sent the son to save the world by transforming hearts and minds and giving us a vision of a transformed world, where compassion, justice, forgiveness, and love are the values that shape us – not a box full of beliefs.

The well-known Disciples preaching professor, Fred Craddock, used to talk about our ability to shrink the Christian faith down to a manageable size. We know what we know and that's enough. Our little God box is full. There's not room for any more stuff in there. It's all there - predictable - understandable - it agrees with my world and doesn't upset me or confuse me. And Jesus comes along and says, "you can't put God in a box." Craddock said, "You can't let the smallness of your mind restrict the greatness of God."

I want to believe that Nicodemus heard that. We don't know how he responded to his nighttime encounter with Jesus but we do know that something that night to Nicodemus. The

next time we read about him his Pharisee colleagues are upset that Jesus has not been arrested. In their anger and ridicule of Jesus, Nicodemus finds the courage to speak up. He says, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" They looked at him in disbelief. "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?" In other words, "You don't actually believe in this guy, do you?"

The question goes unanswered. Was Nicodemus being reborn after all? All we know is that when Jesus died, Nicodemus was there, with a hundred pounds of spices and oils in his arms for Jesus' body.

Those of us who have a religious background can relate to Nicodemus. Next week we will read the story that follows about a Samaritan woman that doesn't have a box, or if she does it isn't very rigid. She encounters Jesus in the brightest part of the day. She is ready to receive the living water he offers. So, if you have never been handed God in a box, you might resonate more with her next week.

We have people who come to this church and love our Open and Affirming stance, and love that we are addressing racism and all the other isms that hurt people, and yet they leave over a theological point. And that is okay, I understand! The door is wide open to them should they ever decide to return. There are others, like Nicodemus, who are ready to question and doubt the God they have held so tightly in a box because the internal dissonance they are experiencing is untenable. They are looking for a safe place to open the box and be born again. And our job is to be that womblike community that welcomes people wherever they are on their journey, creating a safe a nurturing place to seek and question, and doubt. And while we create that womblike space for others to be reborn, we can find ourselves being reborn, again and again.

God doesn't fit neatly into a box, or a pamphlet, or a creed, or a statement of faith, or a doctrine. Certitude is not the goal, but rather an ever- seeking and open heart.

Amen