

Lent 2, Year A
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
March 5, 2023
Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

Human Persons Fully Alive

Poor Nicodemus. He's a tragic figure. He thinks Jesus is both great and scary. He is earnestly seeking. But he never gets what Jesus is teaching, not even at the end.

The story of Nicodemus is one of four gospel texts from the gospel of John that we'll hear today and the next three Sundays. Why the jump from Matthew, our gospel companion this year, to John during Lent? So that we hear four traditional gospel texts for the catechuminate, the process of preparation for baptism. Historically, those catechumens, those preparing for baptism at the Easter Vigil would study the stories of Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus, all from John. This year we also have these four stories on our way to Easter.

Nicodemus comes to have a conversation with Jesus. He comes at night, perhaps so he won't be seen and called out by other Jewish religious leaders who are not as intrigued with Jesus as he is.

I wonder what conversation he came hoping to have. He starts out by affirming that Jesus is a teacher who has come from God. There is no other explanation for him for how Jesus is able to work such signs and wonders. They can't be done apart from the presence of God. This is an affirmation.

In response to this affirmation, Jesus throws him a curve ball. *No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*

Whatever he might have come to discuss goes out the window. Nicodemus is confounded by the idea that there is more than one kind of birth.

How can you teach this, Jesus? If people aren't born into the chosen people, then they aren't born into the chosen people. They can't as grownups be born from a different mother's womb! If they don't have a Jewish mother, they aren't Jews. And if they aren't Jews, they aren't part of us. And they can never be.

This is a good point at which to remember that the gospel of John was composed around the year 100 CE in the great city of Ephesus, the most international and inter-religious city in the entire world at that time. John's gospel was composed originally for the amazingly diverse community of Jesus followers in Ephesus.

The Christian community there was begun by Jewish followers of Jesus, Jewish Christians, but it was open to everyone. As our January scholar-in-residence Alexander John Shaia reminds us, the Christian community at Ephesus is the first community of any kind in human history that we know of, that we have a record of in which it no longer mattered who your mother was.

This community of Christians was gathered around the truth of the gospel of Jesus the Christ. Everyone is invited into this kind of relationship with God. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from or what your heritage or ethnicity or race are. Our tribe is reconstituted in the fellowship of Jesus; our family of origin doesn't determine our place or our status or whether or not we can belong.

The idea that people of any background can follow Jesus and become part of the Jesus movement, the Church, is new as they test it out in Ephesus. The idea that people who are not of the same tribe or ethnicity can be in community and in relationship with one another as equals is unprecedented.

The character Nicodemus only appears in John's gospel, not in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. He's here to lift up this point of inclusion and show how easy it is to refuse it based on longstanding tradition and practice. He's here to remind us how easy it is to resist lifegiving change or to view all change as bad rather than as inevitable and necessary and often good and growthful.

Nicodemus is deeply grounded in one way of knowing, holding, experiencing his tradition. He can't loosen his grip on that way enough to behold, to embrace, to experience a different way.

His grip is so tight on this one way that he's forgotten the expansiveness of his own tradition. He's forgotten what we just heard from Genesis, that Abraham and Sarah were sent out to bring the knowledge of God Most High, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, to all the nations of the world and be a blessing, that in them and through them all the families of the earth were to be blessed.

His mind is so fixed on this one way that he can't conceptualize, as we heard just now from Romans, that the God of Abraham and Sarah gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

God calls into existence things that do not exist. What is that except change, evolution, development, innovation, growth.

We must keep changing, evolving, developing, innovating, growing. This is our vocation. This is our aliveness. This is our life—to increase and expand in knowledge and love. In the words of Bishop Irenaeus in the second century, not too long after the gospel of John was composed, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.”

Neuroplasticity—the ability of the brain to change and adapt which allows the mind to change and adapt, etc—is needed—and possible. Thanks be to God. Our minds can change, and our thinking and believing, our approaches and models and practices can evolve. They have to. This is how we recover from strokes. This is how we integrate experiences and move beyond trauma and injury. This is part of how we heal and grow. It's part of how we move into greater health and longer and better life. This is how we discern and move into God's future.

We can go beyond our mind and our mindset and keep changing our minds as more is revealed and comprehended. This is what John the Baptizer calls for as we heard in Advent. This is what Jesus the Christ calls for as we hear over and over, including today. Change your mind; change your mindset; keep changing your mind. Remain open to understanding more as the Holy Spirit guides you, as Jesus promised, into all truth. This is *metanoia*, change and more change and more change in response to God's leading.

Neuroplasticity is needed. And make no mistake, Nicodemus is in all of us. We all have an inner Nicodemus. It's our inner Nicodemus talking when we lament how different things are now, how much we miss how it used to be, how great it all was. It's our inner Nicodemus talking when we confuse what we remember in the present and how things actually were in the past.

It's our inner Nicodemus talking whenever we utter the Seven Last Words of the Church. Do you know them? They most often appear in one of two iterations:

We have never done it like this.
We have always done it like this.

The Seven Last Words of the Church. Pretty much anytime we are stuck or have an allergic reaction to change, our inner Nicodemus is operative.

Not so long ago I quoted our sister Episcopalian Brené Brown who says, along with Father Richard Rohr, “Everybody wants transformation; nobody wants change.”

The thing is, though, as Episcopalian Christians we rely upon scripture, tradition, and reason. We are constantly learning more about scripture and from scripture. We are constantly learning more about tradition and from tradition. And reason includes both experience and science, both of which are constantly growing, evolving, developing, innovating, changing.

Change is not only the only constant; it’s also our stock in trade. In the midst of all the changes, the thing that doesn’t change is the truth of the Incarnate Word, Jesus the Christ. And we are learning more of that truth day by day, God being our helper, guide, and friend.

So, here’s one place I think we all need to change. Let’s practice since we’re all here together. We need to change how we tend to read the end of our gospel text for today.

How many times have you seen “John 3:16” on a poster at a ball game or concert or on a roadside sign or on someone’s back windshield or bumper? I just saw it, y’all, on Friday painted on the “Jump Off” bridge that spans Government Cut on Lower Sugarloaf Key. There it is, up there plain as day: John 3:16: the so-called gospel in a nutshell.

John 3:16 has been used to sell a lot of spiritual fire insurance, if you know what I mean. It’s been used to raise a lot of people’s anxiety and scare them into making commitments out of fear not love.

Do you know it by heart? In the King James? This is it in the New Revised Standard Version, *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.*

Not believe things about him, but believe in him. And that “believe” is not intellectual assent but trust him, rely on him, make walking his way after his example in the power of the Holy Spirit the centerpiece and chief concern of your

living. This is the journey we begin in baptism as we are initiated into the body of Christ.

And change this: when you read John 3:16 always keep reading through John 3:17: *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.* As we heard on Ash Wednesday: God hates nothing that God has made.

So, let's always read John 3:16 *and* 17 together. Together they say clearly, God loves world. Period. God loves us. Period. This is the good news that Jesus the Christ brought near. We are invited to live the truth of it in every changing circumstance, evolving, developing, innovating, growing in the company of Jesus and one another, ever becoming the glory of God as human persons fully alive.