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“LIVING IN MYSTERY”

John 3:1-17

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My four-year old niece, Ella, is playing tee-ball now. One day, as I went out to join her over at her side of town to watch her play, I pulled into the parking lot at the same time as Ella and my sister. When I got out of the truck, I heard this voice yelling at me from across the parking lot, “Hey, Uncle Elbert!”

I went over to pick her up and after exchanging a big hug, Ella turned to me as she said, “Ms. Helen died. Why did Ms. Helen die?” Ms. Helen was a former co-worker with my sister and had become like a great-aunt to Ella. In fact, Ella has a beautiful afghan from Ms. Helen that she gave to Linda at her baby shower before Ella was born. A few weeks ago, my sister was shocked to hear that Helen had passed away. Not too long ago, she had taken Ella out to eat with Ms. Helen. My sister was planning to go to the funeral later that week. I’m sure that Ella had heard the discussion around the house about Ms. Helen’s passing. So right there in the parking lot, Ella turned to her preacher uncle and said, “Ms. Helen died. Why did Ms. Helen die?”

Caught up in the question for a moment, I said what came to my mind quickly. “Well, Ms. Helen was a little older than the rest of us and that happens sometimes when people get older.” It seems that I always get these conversations from our younger nieces and nephews. “Why did Jesus die? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do people get sick?” It’s usually their parents who call me and ask, “So how do I answer this?” or to say, “Here, answer this,” as they put the kids on the phone.

I was hoping that my quick response would end the questions while I could prepare another answer in my head. Ella, however, looked at me and said, “Ms. Helen wasn’t old.” Well, what do you say to that? As I tried to figure out my next line because I wasn’t quite sure how old Ms. Helen was myself, my sister said, “Yes, Ella, she was older. Sometimes that happens when people get older.” That seemed to satisfy Ella for the time being. I was glad that conversation was over as I wiped the sweat from my brow. And to think that the ballgame hadn’t even started yet!

Children can be quick, can’t they? As much as I remember preparing all of those answers for nieces and nephews before, each time I’m asked, it’s slightly different. What’s worse is that the answers that satisfy them today won’t satisfy them as they grow older, will they?

What about us? How are we with the answers to our questions of faith today as compared with years past? Do you ever feel as if you have more questions than you did when you were younger? I don't know of too many days that go by where I don't wrestle with the answers that used to flow so freely from my lips.

In our lesson from John's gospel this morning, Nicodemus has some questions for Jesus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a leader among his people. You might remember that the Pharisees believed that living in right relationship with God was possible through strict adherence to all of God's law. It was their hope that obedience to the God's law would set our disordered world aright again.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was a learned man who read, studied, and understood the scriptures. Watching from a distance, he notices Jesus and the types of signs that Jesus has accomplished among the people. Perhaps he had heard about how Jesus had just turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. In any event, Nicodemus approaches Jesus one night.

At night, under the cover of the darkness, it is easier for Nicodemus to ask questions of Jesus that might arouse the suspicions of his fellow Pharisees. While some of his colleagues hold Jesus' teachings with contempt, night seems to be a safe time to approach Jesus; to ask questions. Perhaps no one will notice him. Had he come during the day, everyone would know that he was talking to Jesus.

Gail O'Day, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, reminds us that in John's gospel it is important to pay attention to the use of metaphors. For the gospel writer, Nicodemus not only approaches Jesus at night because it may be safer, but also because "Night" is used "to represent separation from the presence of God."¹ You see, Nicodemus is not only trying to maintain a sense of security in the anonymity of the night that surrounds him, but he is residing in that same sense of "night" that is void of the fullness of day, or the fullness of the relationship that God hopes for him and for all of us.

Yet, before we become too harsh with Nicodemus, or others like him for that matter, it is important to note that Nicodemus seeks Jesus out. In a sense, Nicodemus is searching for understanding even while he doesn't quite grasp it. Nicodemus is willing to ask the difficult questions. Even at night, however, he is stepping towards the daylight.

As he approaches Jesus, Nicodemus begins by acknowledging Jesus as "Rabbi," as a "teacher." He understands that the signs that Jesus does are because Jesus comes from God. Nicodemus says, "For no one could do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."² Even in the shroud of night, Nicodemus knows that God must be with this Jesus, for only God could do what Jesus has done so far. Nicodemus sees God at work here even though he struggles to understand.

Jesus continues the conversation with Nicodemus saying, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."³ Gail O'Day notes that the word for "from above" in Greek is *ἀνωθεν* (*anōthen*) and is a double-entendre that we don't seem to get when we translate it into English. The word means both "from above" as well as "again," or "anew." As such, someone who is born *ἀνωθεν* is born from above as well as anew, or again. The word,

in its ambiguity, communicates both a sense of the time of this birth (“again,” or “anew”) as well as the place “from which the new birth is generated (‘from above.’)”⁴

As I read this verse anew this past week, I wondered if Jesus is not affirming that perhaps Nicodemus is beginning to understand. Could it be that Nicodemus, who notices God’s presence with Jesus, is beginning to catch a glimpse of the kingdom that Jesus says can only be seen when one is born “from above” or “anew”? Nicodemus began the conversation at night (symbolizing his inability to understand), yet acknowledged that Jesus is surely from God because no one else could do what Jesus was doing apart from God. Jesus meets Nicodemus where he is, in the safety of the night, to bring him to understanding.

From that point on in the lesson, Nicodemus and Jesus engage in a dialogue of Nicodemus’ questions and Jesus’ answers that only lead to more questions from Nicodemus. It’s almost as if Jesus is walking Nicodemus from the shadows of his night-time experience and his struggle to comprehend into the light of day and understanding.

There is something similar to a childlike faith that begins in this conversation that sprouts from Nicodemus’ questions. Not unlike my niece, Ella, the other day as she tried to understand what was happening in the world around her.

Mark Batterson, in *A Trip Around the Sun*, notes that “Writer Ralph B. Smith once made an observation that children ask roughly 125 questions per day and adults ask about six questions per day, so somewhere between childhood and adulthood, we lose 119 questions per day. A child’s innate curiosity about life is instilled in them at birth by the One who longs to be discovered. The more questions they ask, the more they discover about the world around them. The more they discover about the world around them, the more they discover about the One who made them.”⁵

Like a child, Nicodemus approaches Jesus with questions of faith and Jesus begins the journey with him to understanding. With Nicodemus, we might ask, “So what does it mean for us to be born ‘anew’ or born ‘from above?’” Jesus reminds Nicodemus that this new birth is a spiritual birth; it’s part of what the Spirit of God does in him, and in us. He goes on to say, “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.”⁶

Nicodemus, in his search for understanding, is still trying to figure out what he can do differently. Yet, Jesus reminds Nicodemus that it’s not all about what Nicodemus does, but rather about what God is seeking to do in and through Nicodemus. Jesus’ answer turns the tables on Nicodemus’ questions. As a Pharisee, right relationship with God is achieved through what he does; through what we do as human beings. That’s how Nicodemus understands his faith. It’s why he asks, “How can one be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” It’s as if he’s asking, “How can I do this so that I might see the kingdom of God?”

Jesus knows that the kingdom of God is nearer to Nicodemus than he can imagine. Again, it’s not about what Nicodemus would do, however, but about what God’s Spirit might do through

him. While Nicodemus struggles to understand, God is already reaching out to him. When Nicodemus searches in the night for answers, God, in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, continues to move him towards the light of day; towards the new life that God is offering him and all of the world.

Jesus told Nicodemus, “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.”⁷

The Sunday after Pentecost Sunday is known as Trinity Sunday. It’s the day that we celebrate a God who is revealed as one God, yet three persons. We often struggle in our attempts to define who God is and how God works in our lives. We use Trinitarian language such as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” or “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.” At the core of who God is, however, is One who is so in love with us that God is always actively seeking to live in relationship with us. God is always reaching out to us in so many ways. This is what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus. God loves you and keeps running towards you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It’s a part of God’s nature.

Some have described the Trinity as a mystery because we are trying to describe a God who is so far beyond the limited words of our human languages. Perhaps mystery is a good word for the things that Nicodemus still struggled to understand that night. In his questions, God reached out to Nicodemus, not with all the answers but with an invitation to live in the mystery of God’s great love for him. With all of our questions and struggles to understand, God still reaches out to us, inviting us to live in and out of the mystery of God’s great love for us and the world. In the mystery of relationship, we grow in our knowledge and love of God.

At Birmingham and Berkley First, relationship is key to understanding our FORWARD vision for the next three to five years. As you know, we have outlined three strategic initiatives:

- Growing in Relationship with God through Discipling Ministries
- Building Relationships with those in their 20s and 30s
- Extending Relationships through Multi-Site Ministry

As we enter into relationship with one another and with those around us, we enter into the mystery of our God whose love is revealed in relationship. In relationship with others, we grow in our knowledge and love of God. In relationship with God and one another, we hold each other and are held, even when our questions do not have answers, by a love that will never let us go.

¹ O’Day, Gail R. *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. IX., ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 1995), 548.

² John 3:2c, NRSV.

³ John 3:3, NRSV.

⁴ O’Day, 549.

⁵ Batterson, Mark. *A Trip Around the Sun*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015). 163. (as quoted at <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2015/november/6111615.html>)

⁶ John 3:8, NRSV.

⁷ John 3:16-17, NRSV.