

Of the four gospels it is John where storytelling reaches its peak. There is nothing like Mark for direct action reporting, Matthew for carrying on tradition while still waking up his audience and Luke for expanding the culture and geography of the audience. But John can really tell a story. Today we hear the story of Nicodemus. Don't you want to know how it turns out? After getting to hear his questions, and wondering about why he would come to Jesus at night, don't you want to know? Did he totally disappear, or did he end up Senior Warden in one of the early Christian congregations?

As is often the case when one's spiritual journey is concerned, we don't get the whole story on anyone else. You just never know what happened next. What finally happened to the neighbor who kept asking you about your church but steadfastly said "no, thanks" to your invitation to "come and see."

What do you say when someone asks for your religious story or spiritual journey? Maybe you go into a considerable story about how you grew up in one Christian tradition but came to see the Episcopal Church as the place that said to you, "here is home." Maybe you only tell the story of the place you are now.

For me, I wonder about all the babies I baptized -- where are they? I know there are some who now rarely if ever see the inside of a church -- that would be, among others, my grandsons.

Two weeks ago Tony and I had brunch -- after church -- with one I baptized and his father. The son is now 10 years old and is being raised in the faith in quite intentional ways. Though one cannot draw a straight line from church attendance to attending on God, that meeting was a joy.

The truth is -- you just never know.

When it comes to Nicodemus, the story you heard this morning is our one and only long look at him; he briefly shows up around the trial and burial of Jesus which tells me the encounter we hear today was difficult for Nicodemus to put to rest. It was one of those life changing events, but the details of the change are not going to be completely revealed.

Scholars argue over what did become of him, based on snippets later in the gospel of John. Opinions range from on the one side...

--he stood up for Jesus by challenging the judicial proceedings leading to the crucifixion, and unlike the identified disciples he didn't run away or disappear but brought spices for the burial to the tomb.

to...

In the words of another preacher, "Both his defense of Jesus and the extraordinary amount of burial spices have always struck me as too little, too late." [Alyce M. McKenzie in *Edgy Exegesis*]

*The truth is ... You just never know.*

That's Jesus for you, kind of gets under your skin.

Jesus, Son of God.

Jesus, Son of Man, the only one ~~to~~ ascend into heaven, [and the] one who descended from heaven.+as we hear in today's reading

Jesus my savior.

Jesus the pest.

All these Jesus is, and has been so far in my life. Jesus is not simple; nor is it simple being his disciple. I've said it before and I will say it again; Jesus is not the answer, but Jesus is the Way, the compelling way. We are invited to walk it, and the response is ours to make.

Nicodemus, it seems, has observed Jesus and his deeds carefully. During the time the gospel of John was written there were lots of closet Christians; Jews who could not get Jesus out from under their skin. But a great deal is lost if you, as an acknowledged Jewish leader like Nicodemus, announce you believe Jesus of Nazareth is actually the Messiah for whom you and your fellow Jews had longed for .. longed for for so long. You would lose your friends, maybe even family; you would certainly lose your standing in your community, even be driven out altogether.

But there was no doubt that Jesus was the fly in the ointment of a serene Jewish life. Jews whose notions of who God is and what therefore constitutes a righteous life before the love and the power and the demands of God, those notions were being challenged by Jesus. Among those challenged was Nicodemus.

Jesus kept pointing to the new life, the new order of living, an actually new life that his life was offering courtesy of God. What he said pointed to it; what he did pointed to it. Those who lives were changed,... by their testimony pointed to it.

As Lent begins in the Liturgy of Ash Wednesday we are called to ~~keep~~ a holy Lent.+ Many of us then move to alter habits, to knock ourselves out of the spiritual doldrums we may be in, -- this year I would say personally much exacerbated by the long and cruel winter -- we want to keep, somehow, the rhythm of our lives a little differently so as to follow Jesus a little better. So it becomes a kind of trade-in time. We want to trade-in winter for spring; sounds pretty good to me! We want to trade in old habits for new habits, no, wait! That doesn't sound very promising.

But the way Jesus offers is not to knock ourselves a little bit out of kilter; following him, as he tells Nicodemus, demands that we enter into a whole new way of living.

Jesus ~~clears~~ it up+(Jesus is not a big fan of easy to follow clarity when he's teaching, is he?) by saying you must be born anew, again, from above (depending on the translation) by water and spirit.Part of what is accomplished here is to leave us with a sorely misused and misunderstood phrase that has led to much friction, at least, even worse, between branches of Christianity.

Flesh is flesh and spirit is spirit, and it is this new life

through immersion in,  
or standing in the wind of,  
or zooming through a birth canal of the spirit that leads to a life newly born into and borne along by, the power of the spirit.

The use Jesus makes of such a bodily image to illustrate what he means, alerts us to realize he is not opposing flesh and spirit, rather bringing them together in a holy way.

Nicodemus is right, as he counters Jesus in disbelief: we grown-ups can't re-travel the physical birth experience, but the life to which we are called demands a new orientation of us. The exemplar of this new life is Jesus. His life -- his teachings, healings, warnings and encouragements show us what it is like to live fully in God's new and coming kingdom.

Something radically else is called for. A current faculty member of the Harvard Divinity School, Stephanie Paulsell, puts it this way:

During Lent we seek to have Jesus's story provide the pattern for our lives. The Lenten journey invites us to detach ourselves from the habits and comforts that protect and sustain our status quo and to step out into disorienting space..... this [is] liminal space, where our perspective can shift, where we become vulnerable to transformation, and where new forms of being and living can be discovered. Jesus invites us into this liminal space, a space he explored to its very limits. [ Paulsell in *Christian Century*, March 19, 2014]

Nicodemus, a learned Jewish teacher, could not tolerate the disorientation, the utterly new framework he was shown. I sense he had a strong yearning to take the leap, but I don't believe he leapt. He preferred the darkness in which he lived, wonderfully parallel to his manner of seeing Jesus at night. The possibility of living in the light, the gospel writer's strong presentation of God's kingdom, was too much for his eyes.

One reason I would bet Nicodemus never came out as a Christian is that I know it is hard to accept the invitation Jesus makes.

It's not that living in the light is not attractive, it's just that living in the dark is so much more comfortable. Even if I can't see well, I know where the furniture is. I think I know my weaknesses and shortcomings, though I'm certain those who know me well could add to that list. Life is not perfect this way...but it's not bad, is it? It'd do.

It is in fact the land of our shadows we're asked to move around in during Lent. If that's where we are that's what we need to acknowledge and come to know in order even to approach an outline of what our life can be. That new life in the spirit into which we are invited by Jesus. Don't be discouraged if you begin to bump into the furniture -- you may be moving around some significant things, the sofa for example instead of a knickknack on a shelf.

I read a column by David Brooks this week that is relevant to this gospel. He develops the sense of a fully human being in what we may call purely secular language, but listen for the blowing of the spirit.

We originate with certain biological predispositions....But depth, the core of our being, is something we cultivate over time. We form relationships that either turn the core piece of ourselves into something more stable and disciplined or something more fragmented and disorderly. We begin with our natural biases but carve out depths according to the quality of the commitments we make. [David Brooks, NYT, "The Deepest Self", March 13, 2014]

Relationships and commitments. God is never mentioned in this piece, and far be it for me to guess at the spiritual journey of David Brooks. You just never know.

But we do know God is all about relationship and commitment. Jesus is our companion on the Way, the Way he shows us through the spirit. We are not alone in this liminal Lenten space. And the journey to understand this and make the commitment to live in the light is ongoing. When we respond to Jesus inviting us into a new life bathed by the spirit we can be fully the creatures God created us to be.

As for Nicodemus, you never know. Maybe I dismissed his yearning to be changed too easily. Maybe I dismissed him because of my own struggle in being a disciple. Let me close with brief excerpts from a poem written describing the walk home Nicodemus takes after being with Jesus.

...tonight you walked  
these streets to meet  
this new rabbi,  
this one who breaks patterns,  
this challenger of authority,  
this maker of wine  
from simple water.

to heat words like  
a light flickering  
at the edges  
of sight,  
a lamp kindled inside  
a side room:

*Be born of the the Spirit, of  
the wind, he tells you,  
to see  
the kingdom of God -*

as if to say that

the kingdom  
you long for is  
not a thing that you touch  
as much as something  
like the wind  
that touches you -

...

Can words become stars  
of fresh promise?  
Can the wind bring  
new breath to the earth?  
Can someone whose heart  
ceased dreaming long ago  
begin again with this  
listening tonight?

...

You feel almost as if  
breath itself has taken  
new shape within you:  
the shape that hope forms  
when it is growing anew.  
For you may not understand  
all that he means by  
being lifted,  
but you believe he brings  
the kingdom, nonetheless:  
the kingdom that is  
life with the nature  
of the eternal:  
the life that is God's Spirit  
touching you.

Do not wonder  
at that which stirs  
within you, Nicodemus.

It is your heart  
becoming morning  
once again.

[Andrew King from his blog via Text This Week, March 14 2014]

Truth is, when Jesus, is around you never know.