

Lent 2: 12 March John 3:1-17

On Wednesday at our lenten study we chose an object to interact with and to help us introduce ourselves. I chose a piece of coral or maybe it was stone, I don't know. It was porous, with holes all over, and light, and not cold. Where did it come from? What is its story? This object is a mystery to me, like God. I can only be open, wait, watch, listen, use all my senses and imagination to discover what it is, not put a label on this thing I chose, or put a label on God either, just explore the unfolding..

"St Augustine is walking along the beach when he sees a little boy digging a hole in the sand and running back and forth from the ocean to fill the hole with water. Curious, Augustine asks the boy, 'What are you doing?'

The little boy replies, 'I'm putting the ocean in this hole.'

Augustine says, 'Little boy you can't do that, the ocean is too big to put in that little hole.'

The boy who is really an angel responds, 'And so Augustine, is your mind too small to contain the vastness of God.'"<sup>1</sup>

The Gospel of John, is John remembering as he looked back at the meaning of the life of Christ. John is the mystic and poet who writes sixty or seventy years after the death of Jesus. It is somewhat like us looking back at what Jesus' message and life means to us and our community. John uses the story of Jesus and Nicodemus as a teaching opportunity for the emergent and struggling early church.<sup>2</sup>

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, perhaps so that he won't be seen by his highly critical Pharisee brothers, but perhaps also in a state of intellectual or emotional obscureness. Cautious, concrete, literal-minded, entrenched in his beliefs and practices, Nicodemus is genuinely curious and humble in light of Jesus' signs. Despite the frustrating conversation in today's Gospel, Nicodemus later stands up for Jesus against the Pharisees (7:50-52), and, with Joseph of Arimathea, receives and buries the body of Jesus after the crucifixion.

I love Nicodemus. I, too, come to Jesus by night; intrigued, yet weighted with lots of "buts," "how cans," "what ifs." And I, too, would have preferred concrete answers to questions regarding my life's directions rather than "let go and sail away with the Spirit."

Nicodemus represents the seeker who wants simple answers.

He asks Jesus "How am I born again? Do I enter back into my mother's womb?"

We, looking back may or may not understand Jesus response: "You have to be born again with water and the Holy Spirit". Many have no idea what Jesus is talking about.

John's church was working to establish Baptism as the rite of initiation into the Christian community. As such, Baptism was and is the river into which one dips or plunges to receive the Holy Spirit. And yet Jesus (and John) may have had something more in mind: Maybe Nicodemus' idea of God was too circumscribed, narrow and acculturated.

'Being born again has something to do, John says, with unfurling the sails to catch the wind of the spirit and inhale the breath of God'. Although Jesus can be powerfully present to those who choose to be in relationship with Him, to be born again is more than to have the warm feel of Jesus' nearness. The dangers of this approach if you take it too far is to risk placing God in a box, tie God up in a nice package, name it Jesus, and stop looking, become closed and smug and self-satisfied. Jesus did not come to be another box for God.<sup>3</sup>

He came as a door opened to the world and time, through which we can pass with new eyes and a new heart.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://storiesfromapriestlylife.wordpress.com/2014/03/12/nicodemus-john-31-17-2nd-lent-2014/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://storiesfromapriestlylife.wordpress.com/2014/03/12/nicodemus-john-31-17-2nd-lent-2014/>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

Jesus works for us who are already believers as this prime door opener.  
Don't you think that Jesus would find joy in any who would access the door to the Eternal?  
If people can find any door to the eternal are they not among the blessed?  
That's what I want for every one, to find that way to the spirit, the door to a wider compassion, to justice, to a loving and merciful heart and mind.  
For John and me that way is the face of Jesus. We show as much of that face as we can as an offering and a bridge to the holy. We try to keep the door unlocked and open. We are in the same boat as John, looking back and remembering how to open to God with John's images and metaphors coming to us in our prayers:  
"Be born again. Become flame. Listen to the wind. Be washed and cleansed from your broken places. Drink living water. Be still and know that I am God. Be light. Life. Truth. Peace. Be."<sup>4</sup>

While a part of me is like Nicodemus who wants simple answers to eternal questions , I need the language of John whose images and words of Jesus visit my prayers and remind me that "the mind is too small to contain the vastness of God."  
And each day is a reminder to be born again.

I offer you a story from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers:  
"Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, 'Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, 'If you will you can become all flame.'"<sup>5</sup>

Abram trusted God and left everything he knew to follow. The psalmist professes faith in God in everything. Paul, in Romans also speaks of this journey of faith, of trust. Nicodemus is learning about that. That is our lenten journey: to walk in faith and trust in the mystery that is the God of love, the God of Jesus.

William Temple writes: 'Don't wait till you know the source of the wind before you let it refresh you, or its destination before you spread sail to it. It offers what you need; trust yourself to it.'  
-William Temple 1881-1944 *Readings in John's Gospel*<sup>6</sup>

Jean Varnier reflects:  
'In the face of the certitudes, the "we know" of Nicodemus,  
Jesus proposes another way:  
they way of "not knowing,"  
of being born from "above."  
That means becoming like a child again, a child of God,  
a new person,  
listening to the Spirit of God and letting ourselves  
be guided by the Spirit.

... We do not know where she is leading us.'  
-Jean Vanier *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*<sup>7</sup>

Susanna

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<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> <https://storiesfromapriestlylife.wordpress.com/2014/03/12/nicodemus-john-31-17-2nd-lent-2014/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2011/03/17/lent-2-born-of-water-born-of-spirit/>

<sup>7</sup>

In <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2011/03/17/lent-2-born-of-water-born-of-spirit/>

