

LENT 2, Mar. 12, 2017, Year A

"He came to Jesus by night..." (from John 3:1-17)

- It is night. Some things are easier under the cover of darkness. Daylight suggests *accountability, not always welcome* when we're uncertain about our choices. *Darkness provides more room for indecision and exploration.* And so, *it is after dark* when Nicodemus slips out of the house, and walks through the quiet alleyways of the city. A gentle breeze stirs the branches above him. Silently, he climbs stairs to the roof terrace where he is told Jesus is staying. To his surprise, he finds the country rabbi expecting him. And so, there's no hesitant pause, no time spent in small talk. Nicodemus goes right to the heart of the matter, *but in a circumspect way.*
- "Rabbi, we know you're a teacher from God. For, if God wasn't in you, you could not do all the *God-revealing acts* that you do." Jesus unexpectedly responds to him with an *invitation*. He says, "*Hear me*: Unless a person is born from above, it's not possible *to see* what I'm pointing to – which is *God's kingdom.*"¹
- Nicodemus *hungers to see God's kingdom.* He wants to see it *so much*, he arrives in the middle of the night to talk about it. *Yet*, the *wavering* Nicodemus not only finds *security in the night darkness*; *he hides behind the furtive safety of a rhetorical question*: "*How can a person be born who has already been born and grown up? Please tell me: what are you saying with this 'born-from-above' kind of talk?*"
- *In the light of the moon, and a flickering lantern, Nicodemus observes a knowing smile spread across Jesus' face.* He perceives that Jesus is *not* talking about mothers and babies. He's talking about *God*, and *grown-up people*, just like Nicodemus. But to acknowledge this, the senior Pharisee must concede an awkward fact. Having come by night, he will have to admit that—*in more ways than one—he is 'in the dark.'* He's *looking* for a light he doesn't yet *have*. So Jesus says to him, "*I don't think you're listening. Let me say it again.* Unless a person *submits* to God's *original creation* (—*the wind 'hovering over the water' creation*, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—) it's not

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possible to enter God's kingdom. When you look at a baby, it's just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within, is formed by something you *can't* see and touch. The person within becomes a living spirit."

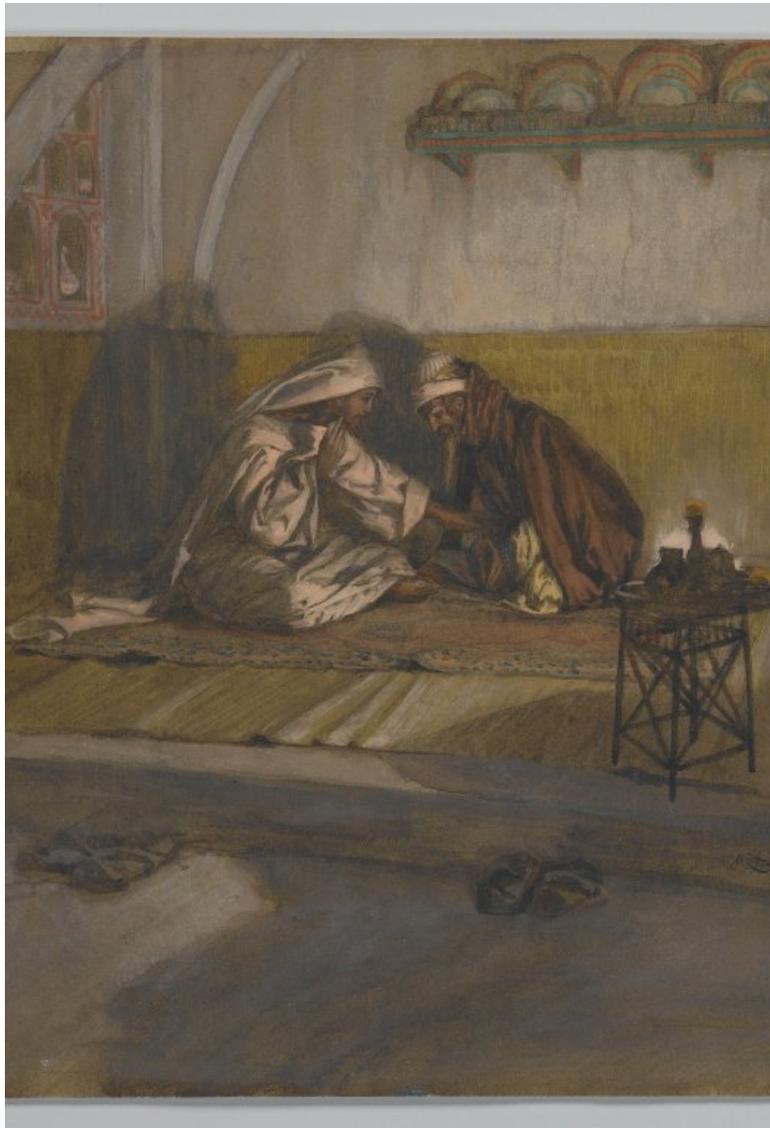
- Leaning back on the cushion against the low wall of the terrace, *Jesus raises his hand in a sweeping gesture*. "*Don't be so surprised*, my friend, when I tell you that you have to be '*born from above*' – from *out* of this world. Listen to that breeze, stirring through the branches of the trees above us. We feel it and know it's there. But who can say where it's come from, or where it's going? That's the way it is with everyone '*born from above*' by God's Spirit."
- Nicodemus draws closer to Jesus. *The teacher has astutely identified what he is looking for*. Having come here under the canopy of darkness, he now glimpses the Morningstar, the herald of a new day. "*So,*" he *can't help but ask*, "*How?... How does this happen?*"
- *With a twinkle in his eye, Jesus gently prods Nicodemus*. "*You're a respected teacher of Israel*, and you *don't* acknowledge these basics? *Listen carefully...* We speak *only* of what we know *by experience*; we give witness only to what we have seen with our own eyes... If I tell you things that are *plain as the hand before your face* and you *don't* believe me, *what's the use* of telling you about *things you can't see*, the things of God?"
- *Nicodemus looks away from the penetrating eyes of the smiling man reclining across from him*. He wants so much to throw himself on the floor before Jesus – and say, 'I am coming with you... I will follow you, wherever you go...' ... *But, this is difficult. He is not ready*. He's not ready to leap, like Abraham was said to have done.
- *Nicodemus quietly gets up*. He walks to the edge of the terrace, and then looks back. Jesus is still sitting, leaning against that same cushion. But his hand is extended toward Nicodemus, palm open, in a gesture of invitation. *Nicodemus hesitates*, looking at the welcoming hand, looking into the eyes of love, considering this unique moment.

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- *"I need to think," he says. Quietly, he descends the stairs leading down from the terrace. Through a sea of waking dreams, he walks back into the darkness of the alleyway. (pause)*
- God has shaped this world in such a way that it is *thoroughly inhabited by grace*, and now *made alive* by God's Spirit. *Through God's abundant generosity, we have been shaped to become dwelling places, temples of God's life-giving Spirit.* Perceiving this... accepting this... *kingdom grace shapes our seeing, more than does fallen disorder.* But accepting this also means accepting 'death' to one way of living, and being raised to another. God's generosity transforms our outlook into a God-like generosity.
- For Jesus to say, *'this is like a birth,'* is no minor thing. As we know, physical birth is full of potential complication – even the possibility of injury and death. Yet, not unwisely or naively, *Jesus chooses the timeless metaphor of birth with which to speak of our entry into the kingdom of God.* *It does not suggest an easy transition.* For we must leave behind our attachment to congenial contexts. We are then pushed and squeezed with difficulty *through what often feels like darkness,* into a new realm of light. This is what it means to be born from above, by the Spirit. In Spirit-life, we travel this path *again and again.* *If we seek to live in the kingdom, we'll always be on this journey.*
- *We journey from darkness to light. Often, we go through an in-between state resembling the murky sky before dawn.* Like Nicodemus, we face a challenge. *Do we want to see? Do we want to see beyond what is literal, through symbols into a deeper mystery?* Are we ready to respond to *promise*, especially to promises made by God? Today we hear a reading from Genesis about *someone who did.* God calls Abram –who is well into his maturity– to leave home and go to a new country. God makes three *generous* promises to Abram that shape the rest of history: first, a promise of *land*; second, a promise of *descendants*; and third, a promise that through him and his descendants, a *blessing* will come to all the families of the earth. In one another, we find this blessing here today.

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- We are thankful that, as people “who have gone astray from [his] ways,” we can call upon God, and *claim* this blessing.² Paul tells us that God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”³ **We ask God to give us new life.** By doing so, we will go further than Nicodemus was willing to go, on that dark night. He *was drawn to*, and he *approached*, Jesus’ glory. But Jesus doesn’t simply *approach* us, for **he has entered into our disfigured humanity.** He has joined himself to us, so that –*aided by his grace*– we can *live*. And, so that we can live into the likeness of his glory.



James Tissot, *Jesus' Meeting with Nicodemus*

John 3:1-17 [NRSV]

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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 apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 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?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

“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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“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.”

{Important note: This homily contains many quotations from John’s Gospel, which are a mixture of the NRSV translation and The Message translation by Eugene Peterson, some of which have been adapted}

Notes:

¹ Perhaps indicate here, in this note, that four or more words are used to suggest various forms of apprehending, seeing and perceiving, in John’s Gospel.

² Words from our Collect, joined with words from our first reading from Genesis.

³ From Paul’s letter to the Romans, 4:1-5, 13-17, which forms our Epistle reading.