

**Sunday, March 8, 2020**  
**Second Sunday in Lent (Year A)**

Psalm 121; John 3.1-17

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**“Experiencing God Anew”**

Years ago, when I lived in Redlands, I used to walk every morning, after my morning prayers and before I got ready for work. As I walked through the neighborhood in which I lived, my eyes were continually drawn to the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains, just north of our community. At such times, my mind would turn to the opening two verses of our Psalm for today: “I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth” (Ps 121.1-2). Those hills, and the verses that came to mind, were a continual reminder of God’s presence. Even more, a reminder of my need to rely on God. That I could do nothing on my own. Particularly when times were difficult, when I had questions, when I needed guidance.

But it was not just the verses of Psalm 121 that provided comfort. The hills themselves were a source of great comfort. Of course, I have images of Julie Andrews singing “The hills are alive, with the sound of music” running through my head. One thing I realized during the three years I spent in Evanston, Illinois, while in seminary, was how much I missed hills. How much I missed any sense of topography. I realized that having spent the better part of my life in Southern California, I find great comfort in always being able to look out to the horizon and, pretty much wherever I looked, seeing hills or mountains in the distance. Particularly in Riverside and other parts of the Inland Empire, where you are surrounded by hills or mountains on nearly every side. For me, it feels as if the hills and mountains are God’s arms reaching out and embracing me, keeping me safe. Providing a way to experience God’s presence, God’s love, in a different way. Providing a connection with God in a different way. In those moments, the spirit within me echoes the words of the Psalmist: “The Lord shall watch over your going out and your coming in, from this time forth forevermore” (Ps 121.8). An assurance that God is indeed with me, caring for me, supporting me, loving me. A reminder that God comes to me, that I can experience God, in even the most mundane ways and moments of my life.

I imagine it is that desire for deeper connection with God in new and possibly unexpected ways that, in today’s Gospel reading, drove our friend Nicodemus to sneak out under cover of night to meet with Jesus. We don’t know a lot about Nicodemus. We do know he was a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the legal tribunal at the Temple in Jerusalem. Not unlike our Supreme Court. So, he was high up in the Temple establishment. The same establishment that was “out to get” Jesus. Despite his official position, he obviously had differing views than the other members of the Sanhedrin or many other Pharisees. He seems to have been attracted to, or at least intrigued by, Jesus and his teachings. Perhaps he was even a secret follower of Jesus. Undoubtedly, he saw some deeper truth in what Jesus was doing than could be found in his own tradition with its strict adherence to the Law. Which put God in a box—the Ark of the Covenant—and hid that box away in the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

Nicodemus starts off his meeting by praising Jesus. Perhaps buttering him up before hitting him with the reason for his clandestine visit. Before Nicodemus can even get out the purpose for his visit, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (Jn 3.3). We don’t know why Jesus chooses to go there, but it’s likely that it was just what Nicodemus needed to hear. The answer to Nicodemus’ burning question, his fervent desire, that prompted him to seek out Jesus by cover of night. The thing is Nicodemus doesn’t quite understand what Jesus is saying. The problem is that the word translated as “from above” can also mean “anew.” So, while Jesus says, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” Nicodemus is hearing it as “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew.”

The exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus that follows is about Nicodemus trying to more fully understand what Jesus means. Nicodemus is being literal in his interpretation and Jesus, being typically Jesus, is speaking more metaphorically. Of course, Nicodemus is not really thinking one could be physically born again. He is, rather, engaging in a method of Rabbinic dialogue that parsed the words—sometimes to extremes—as a means of drawing out the true meaning of what is being conveyed. But at the end of the dialogue, Jesus expresses surprise: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” (Jn 3.10). Jesus is implying that Nicodemus does not seem to understand the concept of spiritual rebirth. At least not fully. Scholars have suggested that Nicodemus was an educated, intelligent man, probably quite scholarly if he were part of the Sanhedrin. As such, he was probably stuck more in his head than his heart, at least when it came to religious and spiritual matters. He was not as familiar with the mysteries of faith as he was with the mechanics. Particularly this new faith that Jesus espoused. Or this new way of experiencing relationship with God that Jesus not only proclaimed, but also modeled. That’s probably why Nicodemus went to see Jesus in the first place. To get some personal instruction in these matters. To learn how he might move from head to heart in his experience of God. In his relationship with God.

In his opening comments, Jesus is, of course, not talking about being physically reborn. That is not possible. Rather, he is talking about being spiritually reborn. Hence, our translation of the Bible using “born from above” as opposed to “born anew.” Jesus talks about this being birth by water and Spirit. Images that we now recognize as associated with baptism. The sacrament whereby we share with Christ in his death and resurrection. Sharing in the new life that Jesus offers to all. That Jesus promises to all.

Now, let’s skip all that cryptic stuff Jesus talks about after this: being born of flesh versus being born of the spirit; wind blowing where it chooses; believing about earthly things versus heavenly things; and so on. The real gist of what Jesus is getting at is in his initial statement to Nicodemus, as Nicodemus heard it and interpreted it: “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew.” It is clear from the exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus that what Nicodemus is searching for new ways to connect with God. To experience God. To be in relationship with God. To take God out of that box in the Holy of Holies. To learn how he might experience God in new and unexpected ways, in the ordinary moments of his life.

Nicodemus, being so steeped and indoctrinated into a way of viewing God, a rigid way of understanding relationship with God as viewed through the lens of the Law, needs a new

perspective. He essentially needs to start fresh. He needs to be open to experiencing the mystery of God anew. In this respect, he needs to become as a newborn baby. To allow a new form of relationship to grow and develop between a newborn Nicodemus and his adoring and loving God.

Of course, Nicodemus cannot completely wipe out his old understanding of who God is, of how he relates to God. But he can seek to open himself to looking at the world, at God, with new eyes, just as a newborn would. To experience the world, as if for the first time, just as a newborn would. To opening himself to the wonders around him in a new way. The wonderment and awe that children inherently have—that is so often educated out of them. To relearn how to see the mystery and wonder in the world around him that can reveal the mystery and wonder of God. For this to happen requires that Nicodemus first open himself up to the Spirit. That wild and playful manifestation of God that “blows where it chooses.” Jesus says, “so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn 3.8b). That those who are born anew, born of the Spirit, have the capacity to tap into that wild and playful aspect of God, that childlike wonder, that allows them to see God in unexpected ways and in unexpected places. In so doing, it allows them to experience and relate to God in new ways. To allow them to experience and relate to God in deeper ways.

We don't know what became of Nicodemus. He is only mentioned two other times in John's Gospel. Once when the Temple authorities were talking about ways to get rid of Jesus, where Nicodemus steps in to raise a point of law which could be taken as him sticking up for Jesus. And finally, when he and Joseph of Arimathea go to prepare Jesus' body for burial after his crucifixion. A definite sign of support, even of love. I like to think that his first encounter with Jesus changed Nicodemus. That he was born anew, born of the Spirit, and was able to find what he sought. That he was able to experience God in new ways, deeper ways.

The season of Lent is about seeking deeper and more authentic relationship with God. It is about seeking to find God, to recognize God's presence, in all areas of our life. In that case, maybe Nicodemus is the poster boy for Lent. Maybe Nicodemus can serve as a guide to us on our own Lenten journeys. Where we seek to be born anew, to be born of the Spirit, which allows us to see God, to encounter God, in new ways, in wild and playful ways, with childlike wonder and awe. In ways that prepare us for the ultimate revelation, the ultimate experience, of his unbounded love for us manifest through the resurrection of Jesus Christ at Easter.