

March 15, 2015  
Falcon Heights Church, UCC  
Falcon Heights, MN

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
John 3:1-17  
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

## THIS CALL TO RE-WIRE

When was the last time you stood outside in the dark, or perhaps gazed from a window, and watched moonlight wash over your backyard, the woods, a field, your neighborhood street? Objects and colors look so different in the night, especially washed with moonlight. The French Impressionist artist Vincent Van Gogh painted a lot of night scenes, claiming that night seemed more alive and richly colored than the day. The picture in my mind's eye is the rippling celestial whirls of his painting "Starry Night." Haunting, compelling. Even right before dawn, the dark hours can seem shadowy, mysterious, sometimes unnerving. And they fascinate us.

The Gospel writer John often used nighttime settings as he described Jesus' own struggle with his mission, and also people's perplexed reactions to Jesus. In John's Gospel, darkness becomes a symbol of confusion, unbelief and temptation. And also of choices and possibility. I think of the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus speaks urgently to God right before his arrest, while his disciples doze off. The predawn darkness in which the empty tomb is discovered. Contrasting images of light and darkness, John will unfold the compelling metaphor of Jesus the "Light of the world" that "shines in the darkness."

Today, we hear a story of a man who journeys out into the darkness of night, wending his way through the labyrinth of unlit streets that was first century Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples had arrived in the Holy City for the Jewish Passover celebrations at the great Temple. Still ahead of them are the confusing and frightening events of Jesus' final confrontation with the religious and political authorities. But this night, all is quiet.

The Pharisee Nicodemus of this nighttime encounter was a member of the Council of the Sanhedrin, the official Jewish court made up of 70 scribes, priests and elders. Clearly a respected and important community leader. But one might wonder, why was he sneaking around in the dark? Was he worried what his Jerusalem colleagues would think if he talked with Jesus? Many of the Pharisees were increasingly concerned that Jesus' teachings and rabble-rousing would bring down the wrath of the Romans on the whole Jewish community. But there was also an ancient tradition that the Torah, the written Law, was actually best studied at night, when all was quiet and you could really focus on the complexities and marvel of the text. Some Biblical commentators suggest that Nicodemus was a true seeker, had been paying attention to Jesus' teaching and

healing work, and now came to “study” him in the still of the night (Patricia Farris, *Christian Century*, Jan. 30-Feb. 6, 2002).

Nicodemus begins by respectfully addressing Jesus as “Rabbi,” meaning revered teacher. We hear the caution in his words; he politely acknowledges Jesus is from God (not divine, *from* God) because of the miracles Jesus has performed. Jesus seems to ignore Nicodemus’ respectful opening words and makes this curt and unexpected pronouncement: “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” “Excuse me? What?” Nicodemus may well have responded.

And this is where the warning lights start to flash for many of us in the 21st century and we mentally screech to a halt. This language of being born again, and also the following verse about *believing so you can have eternal life*, has been incredibly divisive in the Christian church. And it has made for a lot of stereotypes and bad press about purportedly exclusive Christian claims. I am talking about the assumption that *you are either in or you are out*, depending on what you believe. This has had disastrous historical consequences, of course, as anyone considered *out* has, at various times in church history, been shamed, excluded, persecuted and/or killed.

But notice that Jesus doesn’t speak about getting *into* the kingdom of God, like it is a locality, or, as many assume, a place we might arrive when we die. He talks about “seeing,” or better translated, “perceiving” God’s kingdom, reign of justice and compassion among us. Jesus speaks as if it is already here, all around and even within us. Our problem seems to be with a deeper perception of the eyes of the heart. “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again/anew” says Jesus. Other translations read “born from above.” The word *anaothen* for “born” has double meaning in Greek: “Anaothen” means both “from above” and it means “again or anew.” Unfortunately, most Bible translators, moving from Greek to English, chose one meaning or the other and we lose this intentionally ambiguous reply of Jesus. It’s as if he says to Nicodemus, “dig deeper...things are not as they seem...you must re-wire your way of thinking about these things.” Great spiritual teachers do this: They tell stories, riddles, *koans* in Japanese Zen Buddhism that confound the brain’s usual ways of perceiving and explaining great mysteries. Why? Because the rational, logical brain is not the primary tool for the job when it comes to perceiving the spiritual realm and God’s activity among us!

But is Jesus asking for a type of “blind faith”? I don’t think so. For Jesus, “the kingdom of God” covers a lot of ground: It is an environment (of justice, peace and healing) and a time (bursting into this present moment). Clearly, new birth is going to enable a new kind of relating to God’s reality among us; this is where Jesus is going. But another way to comprehend this is to play with the idea of consciousness, our intuitive awareness that goes beyond our five senses. Perhaps the kingdom of God is a place you come *from* in Jesus’ experience.

Was Jesus talking about a different state of consciousness? This is where the contemporary Episcopal writer and mystic Cynthia Bourgeault goes in her book some of us have been reading during Lent: "Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind" (p. 30). It's as though Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to step into another dimension. This can sound a tad new-agey, or "theology lite," for some of us, but is worth exploring.

Bourgeault suggests that the kingdom of God is actually a "whole new way of looking at the world. A transformed awareness that literally turns the world into a different place...a world that doesn't make separations between God and humans, between humans and humans, between humans and creation...." She calls it a "world of mutual abiding" where God dwells in us and we dwell in God. A complete mutual indwelling of different entities, an indwelling that already *is* that we begin to experience through spiritual practices of prayer and meditation. Practices that begin to change our consciousness so we begin to see our neighbor's being as a continuation of our own. We start to see our neighbor's well-being as a continuation of our own well-being. I think Bourgeault is on to some of the more revolutionary aspects of Jesus' teachings. Come join us on Thursday nights if you want to dig deeper!

Nicodemus can't see or imagine himself being born again or anew or from above. That process looks too unknown, too problematic, too risky. He gets stuck in a literal interpretation: "How in the *world* can you go back into your mother's womb?" The man just can't grasp that Jesus is talking about a transformative experience of the living God through knowing, trusting and saying "YES" to the Jesus in front of him.

"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 everlasting life," Jesus continues. What was he really saying here? "You have to get your thinking straightened out? Your theological concepts need to be correct?" But in story after story of encounters with Jesus, people are not grilled about their theological beliefs about him before he will talk with them, heal them, help them. The Greek word for "belief" used here is less about an intellectual concept and more about an action. The Greek word *credo*, "I believe," is more accurately translated as "I give my heart to" or "I trust in." What is Jesus asking Nicodemus to give his heart to, to trust in? The key here seems to be what is meant by "eternal life." All too often we immediately think of some heavenly, blissful existence where we live forever after we die. But "eternal life" is always connected to Jesus' promise that he has come to bring "life, and life abundantly." It's all about a deeper living, a fuller connection with God in this moment, a wider sense of relationship with and responsibility for other humans.

We are not exactly sure what happened to Nicodemus as he left Jesus that night. As Nicodemus walked back to his home through the quiet city streets, perhaps he recalled the steady, glowing brightness of Jesus' presence, his

intensity of being. Something must have started to work in Nicodemus that night, something began to “re-wire” inside of him and he perceived something anew. Because later, when the chief priests and Pharisees want to have Jesus arrested, Nicodemus will insist that Jesus have a hearing before them first. And perhaps most significant, it will be Nicodemus who joins Joseph of Arimathea to remove Jesus’ body from the cross after he is executed. As the crowds disperse on that sad and awful late Good Friday afternoon, Nicodemus will bring pounds of spices with which to prepare Jesus’ body for burial.

We don’t just want theological information; we yearn for a way *in*, to be reborn and made new, again and again. The spirit of the Living Jesus provides both context and illumination for this way into God. Jesus waits for us in the quiet shadows of our hearts, ready to listen and to guide us. May we meet him there. Amen.