Sermon 2nd Sunday of Lent Year A Pastor Leanne Darlington

John 3:1-17

We are in Year A of the revised common lectionary and for much of the year we will use the gospels of Matthew and Luke, but interspersed throughout the year, especially in Lent and Holy Week we will read from the Gospel of John. I thought I would take a little time this morning to give a refresher on John’s Gospel, because it is much different from the other Synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And in doing so we can perhaps gain a little better understanding of our reading in John today because frankly, it is a bit confusing and difficult to understand! Or maybe it’s just me!

The gospel of John was the last gospel written, probably around 90 CE, just before the turn of the first century. It does not contain the story of Mary and Joseph and Jesus’ birth. In John, Jesus’ origin is through the “Word,” as stated John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It is more of a “heady” gospel, meaning that it is more complex and abstract in thought than the other 3. There are no parables in John, there are fewer miracles, and the author uses aphorisms or sayings to make a point….sort of like, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. The gospel of John is more eschatological in nature, meaning that the end times were a present reality, and the presentation of Jesus was more symbolic than literal, but we also see a more human portrayal of Jesus in the gospel of John. He gets tired from a long journey (4:6) he gets irritated at his mother at the wedding in Cana (2:4),and he weeps and mourns the death of his friend Lazarus (11:33-35). He even changes his mind (7:1-10)!

In the Synoptics, Jesus’ conversations with the Pharisees are short and confrontational. In our reading today, Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus was much longer and there was little controversy. The gospel of John also contains irony and even a bit of humour as was evident in our reading today. And finally, in the book of John, we hear much about life and truth, darkness and light, and this brings us to our reading today.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a Sanhedrin. He was a Jewish religious leader who was part of the Jewish establishment. He would have been appointed to uphold and live God’s law. So, you can perhaps understand why he arrived in secret to see Jesus in the middle of the night under the cover of darkness. The mention of night was not simply to indicate the time of day. Light and darkness in John equate belief and non-belief. Jesus was the light in the darkness, Nicodemus was seeking out and searching for that light. Nicodemus had to exercise much caution coming to see Jesus, if he would have been seen by the other Pharisees it would have left him with some explaining to do! He was not yet ready to declare his faith. George Stroup states that Nicodemus “was the forerunner of many of Jesus’ disciples who had to be careful about when and where they practised their discipleship.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He comes to Jesus respectfully calling him Rabbi or teacher seeking an authentic relationship with God. He states that God must be with Jesus, or that God is present in Jesus’ activity, and while it is true it is only a half-truth because in reality, God is not only present with Jesus, Jesus is the very presence of God.

Jesus answers Nicodemus stating that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born *anothen.* *Anothen* is a Greek adverb with three meanings. It can mean to be born from above, born anew, or born again. Nicodemus took the literal understanding of being born again from a mother’s womb. Jesus goes on to explain that to enter the kingdom of God one needs to be born of water and Spirit, but again Nicodemus does not comprehend what Jesus is saying and that’s where the irony and humour of John’s gospel appear. Jesus responds to Nicodemus stating, “Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things” (3:10)? Jesus is asking Nicodemus to let God work in his life, he is asking him to be in a true and authentic relationship with God. Jesus is looking for him to step into the light of the day.

And that is what Jesus does with us daily. Jesus is asking us to be in relationship with God. He is inviting us to come into the light of the day to become disciples through Word and action. Our world seems to be in darkness, I think I say this every week. We live in a world of fear…there was a post on Facebook the other day showing what yearly fears we live with….SARS, Swine Flu, Avian Flu, ISIS, Norovirus, Covid19. I do not want to make light of any of these issues for they are a real threat, but it seems like we are constantly kept in fear, we are kept in darkness, kept from the faith of trusting in one another, kept from the faith of trusting that God is with us in the brokenness of our world. So, saying that, how do we step into the light and let our light shine?

Like Nicodemus, many of us folks are searching to be in relationship with God, we ask questions and most times do not get it. It is interesting to note that Nicodemus appears two more times in John’s gospel. Once in chapter 7 where he attempts to diffuse a conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities, and the last time we read of Nicodemus he is helping Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus’ body after his death. Joseph was a secret disciple of Jesus Christ and Nicodemus brought almost 100 pounds of myrrh and aloe, must more than was deemed necessary to bury a body with. Had Nicodemus come into the light? Was he honouring Jesus or was he as Karoline Lewis states still in the darkness weighing his body down so that he would remain in the tomb?[[2]](#footnote-2) That is the complexity of the Gospel of John, as Lewis also states “Faith is never a noun in the Gospel of John. Believing for the characters in the Fourth gospel is a verb and is subject to all the ambiguity, uncertainty, and indecisiveness of being human.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Our gift and promise of faith invite us to be full participants in the abundant life that is offered in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We cannot do this on our own, as disciples of Christ we are dependant on God, and in this time of Lent we are called back to realize and live into that dependence of God which helps us through our times of fear and struggle, anguish and doubt.

May we too live out our faith as a verb, in the uncertainty and ambiguity of our lives, worshipping with awe and expectation, making a difference in the lives of others, praying for our neighbours, our family and the world around us. We do this out of love for others and our love for God firm in the belief that God did so love the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (3:16).

Amen

1. George W. Stroup, “John 3:17, Theological Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word,* Year A, volume 2, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Karoline Lewis, “John 3:1-17, Exegetical Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word*, year A, volume 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)