

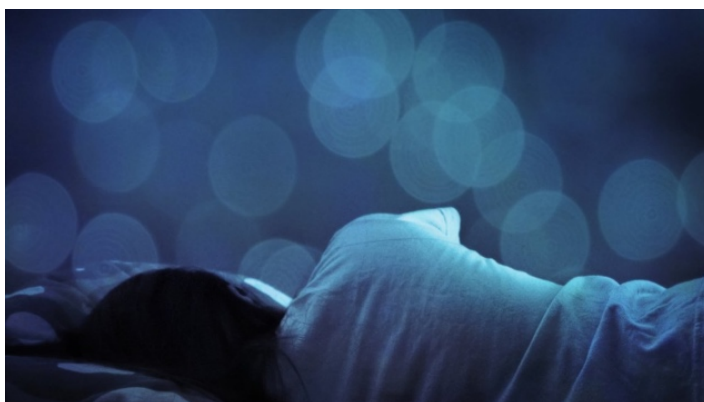
Harcourt Memorial United Church

Sunday, March 8, 2020

**Text: John 3: 1-17**

*Born Again*

Rev. Miriam Flynn



Imagine yourself sleeping peacefully in a quiet, darkened room – unconsciously resting in a lullaby of familiar house sounds that no longer register as anything more than a mother’s heartbeat would to a child in the womb. There you are, blissfully unaware and wholly content with the darkness, when suddenly someone opens the door to your chamber and throws on the light switch. Startling brightness slices through the blue-black beauty of the night, as you instinctively lift your arm to cover your eyes and so shield yourself from the glare.

This is what is known as a *rude awakening*! Perhaps you experienced something akin to this feeling as you awoke on this “Spring Forward” Sunday. I certainly recall a period during my teenage years when this was the way I started *many a new day*. I wonder if this is also what it feels like to be *born again* – thrust into the reality of a new day dawning still dazed and confused by the very sensation of light.



Our second text from the gospel of John this morning invites us to listen in on the conversation of Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus is a religious leader within his community and he's well versed in the scriptures. He is a respected part of the established order, earnestly serving the faithful. It seems that Nicodemus has noticed Jesus preaching, healing and disrupting on the periphery. Nicodemus obviously feels drawn to Jesus and, yet, there is risk for him in publicly acknowledging Jesus. So Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night and sits by the light of the fire to share quiet conversation.

Did you notice the way Nicodemus begins with flattery -- as much as saying, "I've heard you teach; I've seen you in action and I can see you are a man of God!" Jesus, doesn't respond to that at all; he simply cuts to the chase of where he sees Nicodemus hovering at the edge of commitment, with words that challenge him to move beyond the comfort zone of his pre-conceptions into the light of new relationship: "The only way to see the kingdom of God is to be born from above." Jesus tells Nicodemus.

"Born from above" or "Born anew" - what does Jesus intend by this phrase with a double meaning? Nicodemus seems to sense the rational discourse he hoped to have under safe cover of night is about to veer wildly off course. Instead of asking in *what way* he is to be born again, Nicodemus appears to take Jesus literally and questions how such a thing can be possible? Instead of allowing his imagination to move him to understanding Nicodemus insists on clinging to a view of what is *realistic* that blinds him to *what God makes possible*.

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us that Nicodemus misunderstands what Jesus means by "born again." After all, in our own time we often see the rich metaphor of new life in relationship with God flattened down to mean a moment of rational decision. We often hear the invitation to live with radical trust in the saving grace of God's love for the world, whittled down to the simple instruction to "believe in Jesus." And then we hear the call for followers to "believe" whittled down to the matter of accepting a set of narrow propositions about *who and how* God saves. Maybe this happens because it just makes faith *easier* when we can reduce it to a thin calculus of deciding *who's in, who's out* and what can be *realistically* managed from the comfort of the status quo. But that's not really what *birthing* is all about, is it?

Some of us have given birth and we have a heightened awareness, not only of the miracle of the moment of birth, but also, of all the colourful, painful and messy details that go into getting someone born.<sup>1</sup> People are not born because they make a rational decision to be born. They aren't born because they've figured things out. They aren't born through any kind of assessment that their being born is the most *realistic* option. They are born because of their relationship with the one who gives them new life.

What a profound metaphor Jesus offers Nicodemus.... the image of God in labour to deliver God's people. What a profound image for us as church today, being birthed by the winds of the Spirit that blow where they may -- huffing and puffing like a woman doing Lamaze.

Does Nicodemus truly misunderstand or is it just too unsettling for him to acknowledge the consequences for his own life of being born again of the spirit to follow Jesus? We get a clue from the words he uses, "How can anyone be born *after having grown old*? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" If he has taken Jesus literally, it makes sense to ask about how

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<sup>1</sup> My exposition of the birthing metaphor owes much to a sermon by Debbie Blue of House of Mercy, St. Paul, Minnesota found, on-line at <http://www.houseofmercy.org/6312-laboring-god-rev-debbie-blue/>

someone who has been born can return to the womb. But what does having *grown old* got to do with it?

Perhaps the real trouble is simply being settled in one's way of thinking and being, especially where, like Nicodemus, we are invested in the way things are and have worked for years to gain the status and comfort we enjoy.

Jesus seems to sense some resistance in Nicodemus' confusion and perhaps there was. Perhaps Nicodemus is not so much *confused* as simply defaulting to arch rationality that allows him to stay in the comfortable darkness rather than moving into the light of a new day dawning.

It's as though Nicodemus is saying, "Look, you've got to be *realistic* here?" and in appealing to that realism, remains in the dark about the new reality of the kingdom that God, through Jesus, makes possible.

It's a common enough trap for all of us, isn't it?

Lately I've been thinking a lot about the occasions when we make this kind of earnest appeal to realism. I think about all the times I've said to my own kids, "You've got to be realistic" and usually it came down to me advising them to make choices that were less ambitious and to follow pathways that were more conventional or predictable. In urging realism, I was really encouraging them to avoid risk. *Now*, urging caution is not always wrong thing to do but it bears noticing just when we choose to do so and whose *reality* we privilege.

I mean, take a hard listen at how the expression "We've got to be realistic," is used in the public debates of our time. So often the appeal to realism, is a tacit bow to the status quo and the vested interests of the day. I mean, we hear this in the context of public debate about climate change when folks simplistically pit the needs of the economy against the need for ecology, as though a dualism actually exists. We know the economy does not exist separate and apart from the earth that supports all economy -- so how can it be seem as more *realistic* to privilege existing economic interests over the health of the planet? Surely it's truly realistic to imagine ways we may transition from economies that are unsustainable to those that are? Transitioning from patterns that are not life-giving to ways that are.

Appeals to realism need to be tested when they serve to uphold the interests of the way things are, over the possibility of birthing the way things could be.

I was terribly disappointed to see Elizabeth Warren drop out of the race for the Democratic nomination a few days ago. When we default to full slate of male presidential candidates, because “*realistically*” a woman is unelectable, the supposed truth of that bias becomes self-fulfilling prophecy. I find myself wondering when the pinky swear adage that leading is *just what girls do* will ever move from the realm of idle dream to lived reality.

*The only way to see the kingdom of God is to be born from above.* For the kingdom of God would see us live, not as things are *now* on earth, but “on earth *as it is in heaven*.” The kingdom of God calls us out of today’s reality, into eternal life. Life that begins now, but means moving from the dark of a comfortable womb into the light that God’s delivery of us makes possible.

Not all of us have given birth but all of us have been born. *You remember what that felt like, don’t you? Me neither!* Maybe that’s for the best. I don’t doubt that most of us would be perfectly content to have stayed in the comfort and protection of the womb where we didn’t even need to open our mouths to get fed. No doubt it was dark in there, but it must have been a comforting sort of darkness, like a cozy bed we might not want to get out of. Of course, none of us asked to be born. One day we simply found ourselves barreling down the birth canal, the final contractions squeezing us tightly, to get our bodies ready to breathe. Then we emerged in the cold light of day. No wonder most of us hollered ... but then we took a breath and were restored to the arms of the one who delivered us.

Might being *born again* of the spirit be something like that? Nicodemus wants to stay in the comfort of the darkness but as soon as he agrees to meet Jesus he comes into the light of a shared fire. Jesus encounters Nicodemus and challenges him to move beyond the comfort and pre-conceptions of what he says he knows, to new life made possible through radical trust in God’s goodness and power to save.

When Nicodemus talked about signs I think he was talking about Jesus turning water into wine, but today we often see the message of this text from John, displayed on sign boards...



It's important to remember that the whole of the text makes it clear God's intention to save embraces the whole of the world. Otherwise, we can end up reading the signs very exclusively:



*Hmm.... Join the right club?* Is that what the gospel of John is really talking about? Here's Brian McLaren's take:





It may be popular to put the citation John 3: 16 on our signs and T-shirts but perhaps we should not ever read this verse without also reading the next one:

*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.*



The dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus gives way to this teaching by Jesus and as the text we read today concludes, we are left to assume that Nicodemus remains unchanged by their fireside meeting. But, of course, no one remains unchanged by an encounter with Jesus and if you read on in John's gospel, you will find Nicodemus yet again. To *believe*, in John's gospel, is not rational, but relational and the Spirit that brings forth new life from our relationship with the living God, blows where it may.

The Spirit that brought life at the very beginning of all things continues to bring new life today. It is powerful, unpredictable and ongoing. It is the power that moves us out of the darkness into the light. The power that makes something out of nothing so that humanity is reborn. None of us can predict or control the action of the Spirit. We can only long for it, pray for it, wait for it and expect it.

So next time we feel the need to put the brakes on the possibility of living more fully, more compassionately, more justly or more faithfully in the light of God's grace, let's stop and ask ourselves whether we are resisting the irresistible power of the Spirit at work in our lives, our church and the world?

Being born again requires more than rational assent. It is allowing ourselves to receive the gifts of a God who works to make all things new. So if ever wonder if you are once again barreling down the birth canal with the stuffing being squeezed out of you, just so you can enter the dawn of a new day, holler if you must – and I'm sure we all will holler -- but know as the cool hits your spirit and light floods in, this is what new life feels like... and *remember to breathe it in*.

*Amen.*

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