

Second Sunday of Lent (Year A) – John 3:1-17
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

Born Again and Again

“For God so loved the world...”

This passage from John's Gospel has become one of the most quoted and misunderstood lines of Scripture by some of our American brothers and sisters. John 3:17 has been used and misused by many who would attempt to limit God's abundant grace to only a select few of members the human race. Such an interpretation of any part of Holy Scripture is misleading and fails to recognize the inclusive and expansive nature of God love for all that God creates. Church leaders in many Christian denominations have been exploring ways to interpret the mystery and magnificent of God through more inclusive and expansive language for devotional prayers and communal worship.

At our 10am service, we are using ecumenical versions of the Prayers of the People from the “Intercessions for the Christian People.” During our Thursday morning Eucharist we are offering praise and thanksgiving to God using prayers that encourage the full participation of each worshipper with accessible language that is relevant to contemporary ears. And during our Wednesday Lenten Supper Program

we are exploring a variety of liturgical resources for Compline. All of these prayers and liturgies invite us to expand our imaginations as we seek to more fully understand and accept God's love for each of us and for all of us.

One of the prayer resources that has kindled the imaginations of many hearts has come from "A New Zealand Prayer Book. "The language evokes imagery that is feminine and masculine and reconnects us with a God who created not only us but the entire cosmos. In what is often referred to as the New Zealand Lord's Prayer we imagine God as bearing the pain and labor and weight and reality of all that has life.

"Eternal Spirit
Earth-Maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all.
Loving God, in whom is heaven.
The hallowing of your name echoes through
The universe!"

God gives birth to us, and the Spirit bears with us in growing to fullness in the Body of Christ. This is the message that Jesus is sharing with Nicodemus as he speaks of being born from above and being born by the Spirit. There is no exclusivity proclaimed by God to love only part of God's creation; it is only the limited imagination of human hearts that

attempts to cut off God's abundant love from those who may think or look or pray differently from us.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear about someone who is seeking to expand his knowledge and understanding and experience of who God is for him personally, for the religious community of which he is an influential leader, and for all of humankind. Nicodemus is often perceived as a shadowy figure in the Bible. He is only mentioned three times in Scripture, and only in John's Gospel. Two of those times he appears on the scene in darkness of night. But his questions and actions reveal a true desire and longing for God. During the Reformation, the reputation of Nicodemus was challenged not only because he was a Jewish leader, but apparently because he never publicly professed his faith as a follower of Jesus. No one documented the transformation of his heart and life except in a few short verses of John's Gospel. Church leaders at that time used Nicodemus' name in a disparaging way.

Thankfully, the interpretation of his character has evolved over the centuries to be more forgiving and loving and accepting. Perhaps this is why we hear of Nicodemus approaching Jesus with wonder and awe at the beginning of the Church's liturgical season of Lent.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he is wrestling with something so amazing and wonderful it is difficult to comprehend and embrace. Jesus has come from God and all that he does, is in the midst of the Divine One. Nicodemus sees and experiences signs of God's love through the ministry of Jesus and he wants to know more. I imagine that Nicodemus wants to be closer to God through Jesus but he is bewildered, astonished, and scared by the inclusiveness and expansiveness expressed by Jesus' words and actions.

Nicodemus is processing what we in the 21st century may interpret as a spiritual crisis or a crisis of faith; an event or situation that challenges what we have previously believed or known as true. Sometimes that situation is the loss of a job, a grave illness or a death, or even the outcome of a political election. Something happened that transformed the way you think about or experience the world, and you're trying to regain your bearings, and perhaps your faith that God is truly present with us in all of this.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann speaks about these situations not as one-time experiences, but as happening throughout our lives. He writes, "Each of God's children is in transit along the flow of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation." We are always turning and returning

to aspects of life that are familiar and new. And God is always inviting us to reorient our lives back in relationship with Godself and our neighbors. This is what it means to be born again in the Spirit. When we are alert to the movement of the Spirit in our lives, we are more likely to be responsive to where and how God is guiding us. We are not born again by human pageantry and declaration. And we cannot bear the weight and burden of rebirthing ourselves. We can only be born again and again by the grace of God in our relationship with the Holy Spirit. We are born again and again by giving our lives in the service of God and receiving the grace of God whose power is working in us and through us for the benefit of all of God's beloved community.

As part of God's beloved community, we are called as followers of Jesus to observe a Holy Lent through repentance, forgiveness, and amendment of life. Through prayer and fasting from certain worldly diversions, we are called to turn and return to God through the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is through faith, and prayer, and action that we desire God to transform our lives from darkness to light. And it is from this perspective that I am inviting our congregation and neighbors to participate in creating a piece of artwork.

As we move from the darkness of human frailty in Lent toward the light of Christ in Easter, this collaborative art project is a way to reimagine the strength of prayer in our community. It is a creative way to embody our faith and create a collaborative offering to God. The result will be artistic expression of our desire to continually seek God through prayer and action, in times of darkness and light. May the Holy Spirit guide us as we experience God's transformative love in all of the changes and chances of life.

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