

“Other worlds to sing in”

March 20, 2011

Text: *Psalm 121, John 3:1-17*

I.

In the reading I just shared with us from John 3, we cannot help but be curious about the figure of Nicodemus. About this, biblical scholar, Deborah Kapp, says: *If any character in the Bible represents 21st century church members, it just might be Nicodemus.*

What’s going on with him? Is he, perhaps, a lot like us?

Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He’s a prominent member of the community, a community leader. He’s a man who has spent time thinking about his faith, trying to sort things out . . . trying to understand. He’s heard of Jesus. We’re not told if he has met Jesus before or not; most likely he has.

Still, here he is, a man of considerable stature—successful, well educated . . . rational; in fact, probably too rational. And he comes to see Jesus *by night*. Not in the light of day, but at night.

Again, what’s going on with him?

Like Jesus, Nicodemus is a Jew. That’s the world he was born into. But something is going on in his spirit. Something’s going on in his soul. It’s very likely that he’s witnessed, first hand, some of the signs Jesus has performed.

In any event, there’s something about Jesus that has made a deep impression on him. It’s probably a combination of Jesus’ charisma, wisdom, and the aura of his personality. It may well be—too—the ways of his love, the way he is with people and the way people respond to him.

The bottom line is: he’s drawn to Jesus. But because he doesn’t have it all sorted out; meaning, in part, he’s not ready to fully commit—again—Nicodemus comes to Jesus *by night*.

In all fairness to Nicodemus, we need to say a word about the context.

In the Johanne community, the community out of which the gospel of John emerged, there was serious tension between those who had become *followers* of Jesus and the Jews. And Jews, like Nicodemus, who were still *on the fence*, so to speak, didn’t want to risk incurring the wrath of the Jewish leaders and being thrown out of the Temple.

After all—forever—their religious life had been tied to the Temple. So we need to cut Nicodemus some slack for his understandable caution. He has a lot at stake in all of this.

II.

In this Lenten season, what this reminds us of, among other things, is that it's not easy to figure out all of this *faith stuff*. All Nicodemus knows for sure—which he probably can't even bring to speech—is that something is missing in his life. There's an emptiness from within, a yearning of the soul for more.

Again, isn't that our human situation? Aren't we always yearning for more?

More truth, more wisdom, more information, more knowledge, more life-experience; more *going deeper* in life to where we feel a vital, pulsating connection to God, and to *the holy*, and to the power of love to change hearts and make everything about us better?

Isn't this part of our very human, faith journey?

Going deeper is much of what our growth as a person of faith is about. It doesn't come over night. It takes time. It takes hard work. And perhaps, mostly, it takes a willingness to change and to grow from within. That's risky stuff; and we can't get there by just *playing it safe* all the time.

According to Jesus, to *go deeper*, a person has to *be born from above*. When he shares this with Nicodemus, Nicodemus has no idea what that might mean. Going on, Jesus says, *No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit*.

This is all a bit much for Nicodemus at this stage in his faith journey. But, clearly, to go deeper in his faith, he's going to have to take some risks.

III.

Some years ago, there was a small jazz club in New Orleans where—in one of the corners—there was an old, dilapidated piano. All the jazz musicians who played there complained about this antiquated piano all the time.

The piano players dreaded playing on it. The singers dreaded having to sing with it. The groups who played there all wished they could bring their own piano. So, finally, after years of listening to all of these complaints about his piano, the owner of the club decided to do something about it. **He had the piano painted.**

It's like—HELLO! Was painting it going to help? What was needed was a new piano, not merely some *quick fix* paint job. Sometimes, what is needed is a new life, a new faith, a new perspective on everything. But for this to happen, we have to be willing to get outside of our comfort zone and take some risks.

For any of us—like Nicodemus—we don't know what worlds God is calling us to tomorrow. Being born of *water* and *spirit* suggests a total transformation; it suggests real

change. For sure, it's a new start.

But, that's the beauty of our Christian faith. In Christ, in every moment of our faith journey, we are called to newness. We are called to the hope and high promises of tomorrow.

What this says to us, in practical terms, is that we don't have to be held back by yesterday's shortcomings; by yesterday's failures ... disappointments ... darkness or whatever it is.

In other words, none of us has to stay where we are. There is nothing to keep any of us from being *born again*—from a new beginning in any part of our lives—except our fears ... or our lack of will ... or our lack of trust.

IV.

Decades ago, in Seattle, WA., there was a little boy named Paul. One day Paul's family became the proud owners of one of the first telephones in the neighborhood. It was one of those wooden boxes attached to the wall with the shiny receiver hanging on the side of the box, with the mouthpiece attached to the front.

Young Paul would listen with fascination as his mom and dad used the phone; and he soon discovered that somewhere inside this wonderful, new device lived an amazing person. Her name was *Information please* ... and there was nothing she did not know.

Information please could supply anybody's telephone number ... the correct time ... even people's addresses. Paul's first experience with *Information please* came one day when he was home alone and he whacked his finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible and he didn't know what to do. And then, he thought of the telephone.

Quickly, he pulled a footstool up to the phone, climbed up, unhooked the receiver, held it to his ear and said, *Information please* into the mouth piece. There was a click or two and then a clear voice spoke: *Information!*

I hurt my finger, Paul wailed into the phone.

Isn't your mother home?

No, nobody's home but me, Paul cried.

Are you bleeding?

No, Paul said. *I hit my finger with the hammer and it hurts.*

Can you open your ice box?

Yes!

Then go get some ice and hold it to your finger. Paul did what she suggested and, of course, it helped a lot.

Well, after that, Paul called *Information please* for everything. She helped him with his geography and his math. She taught him how to spell the word *fix*. She told him what to feed his chipmunk. And then one day, when Paul's pet canary died, very tenderly, she listened to his grief and then she said, ***Paul, always remember: there are other worlds to sing in.***

Those words stayed with Paul for the rest of his life: ***There are other worlds to sing in.*** Wow! Think of that! A short time later, when he was nine, his family moved to Boston. And over the years, the fond memories of *Information please* lived on in his heart.

Some years later, on his way out west to attend college, his plane stopped in Seattle. He decided to dial the hometown operator: *Information please*, he said into the phone. And to his utter surprise, the voice that had provided so much comfort and help to him through the years sounded back to him on the phone.

After an animated and friendly conversation, he agreed to call her again when he was back in the area. Her name was Sally. Six months later, back in Seattle, he tried to call Sally again, but a different voice answered his call. It turns out that Sally had become ill and had died, but before the operator hung up she said.

*Oh, did you say your name was Paul? Yes! Well, Sally left a message for you. In fact she wrote it down; let me read it to you. It says: **When Paul calls, tell him that I still say, there are other worlds to sing in and he'll know what I mean.** And he did.*

V.

This is the message for us today, friends, from John 3. ***There are other worlds to sing in.*** We are not bound to our world of today. Every day, every moment, the Spirit invites us to be *born from above* ...to be *born of water and spirit*.

Again, what this is about is *going deeper*. *Going deeper* with our life commitments. *Going deeper* in our relationships and in the world around us. *Going deeper* in our awareness of the holy ... and of the good that surrounds us.

And why, we might ask? Because that's where the meaning is. That's where the joy of interpersonal love and caring are. *Going deeper* is what Nicodemus yearned for ... and he sensed that it had something to do with JESUS.

To *go deeper*, we have to give ourselves *to the spirit and to love* in trust—beyond our fears, beyond our anxieties.

Lent invites us to embark with Nicodemus on a journey of *faith-deepening*. It's a journey that nudges us—unavoidably—into a deeper relationship with God and to an awareness that, with God—always—there are **other worlds to sing in** ... and we never know what they are until we jump in.

The key is to seek out these other worlds ... and to trust that they are out there—in the depths of our relationships; in our openness, therefore, to new people, to new ideas, new places, new poetry, new music ... whatever it is. **There are other worlds to sing in**—in our search for meaning ... and in our walk with God.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills, says the **Psalmist**.
From where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.*

*The Lord is our keeper ... our shade at our right hand.
And the sun shall not strike us by day, nor the moon by night.*

*The Lord will keep our going out and our coming in ...
From this time on and forever more.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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