

Sermon for March 16 Lent 2014

Encountering Jesus through the Gospel of John and the story of Nicodemus.

Our theme for Lent as you've heard is Encountering God – and the many ways that can happen. Each Sunday, I, on behalf of worship committee have asked people to share a personal story of Encounter. And note to gift discernment committee, so far no one has said “no” to the request. The people that I have asked have understood that at some time and in some way there has been at least one experience or encounter of God that they are willing to talk about. At the same time, there are people at other times or in other conversations with me who have said that they don't really know what it means to encounter God in a personal way. To this I might say, “Have you ever encountered unconditional love, a moment of awe or been overwhelmed by something beautiful?” What might these moments reveal to you about God?

Specific to this sermon I want to address ways that we encounter God through Jesus and through Scripture. My “way in” to the question is through the story of Nicodemus and his encounter with Jesus in the Gospel of John. Our Sunday school children have been encountering Jesus through the gospel of John for a number of Sundays already. During Lent, the rest of us join them by also spending time with Jesus as portrayed in John.

Spending time with Jesus. That's what I want to talk about. Not spending time with ideas about Jesus or doctrines (church teachings) about Jesus – which might be summarized in words like high or low

Christology, but invite you this morning to realize that when we read or hear the story about the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, we might actually be spending some time with Jesus ourselves. If that's a bit of an unsettling thought, I invite you to just stay with me on this point for a while if you can. What I'm suggesting is that as we work our way through the Nicodemus story, we pay attention to how we are experiencing it, not just what we think about it.

My hermeneutical/interpretive assumption that leads me to suggest that we can actually hang out with Jesus if you will – is that the meaning of this text is the text as it stands in interaction with us – the readers or hearers of it. (Draw two overlapping circles, one that represents us and one that represents the text . Write the word meaning where they overlap)

First a brief aside: A few Sunday's ago, I spent a bit of time “showing you my work – the work that goes into preparing to write a sermon. The same holds true for this one. I reread a lot of the background to the gospel of John, and reminded myself that it was probably written in about 90 AD, that it was written or grew out of the experience of the Johannine community that had recently been expelled from the local synagogue – Because the Johannine community has just been kicked out of the synagogue the gospel produced within their community has a symbolically negative view of “the Jews.” Generally this phrase means the Jewish religious leaders who forced the Jews and Gentiles who believed that Jesus was the messiah out of the synagogue. This is an

important thing to note– so that we don't inadvertently use the Gospel of John to perpetuate anti-semitism. This information is part of the **historical critical background** to this text. It's important information.

The next step is to take seriously the Gospel's literary function as sacred scripture and it is this step that leads me to say that when we read this story we can actually hang out with Jesus if we will.

I agree with scholar Sandra M Schneider on this point that when we approach the text as a sacred text – when we approach the text from a point of view of faith as well as with our intellect that its original intent as sacred scripture remains intact and the text can and does symbolically contain the Word of God.

Let's think about this Word of God for a moment. As the Gospel of John says in chapter one, Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. The life of Jesus, his words and works revealed God to his disciples. This Word that we now have sort of turns that around. We no longer encounter Jesus in the flesh, but this sacred text, this sacred Word can symbolically represent Jesus to us.

The text now represents Jesus and through Jesus represents God to us as people who like the first disciples are still learners on the way.

Let me explain it in a different way. Think of one of Van Gogh's self-portraits. Van Gogh was not trying to make exact replicas of himself. Instead he was trying to represent the essence of himself symbolically through his paintings. To do this he used strong lines and colours. The

end result was far from photographic realism but nevertheless these portraits were not less true representations of himself.

In the same way, the text of the Gospel of John is a portrait of Jesus that is not trying to give us historical accuracy of who Jesus was but rather represents Jesus to us symbolically. This makes the picture of Jesus that we see here no less true, in fact the work of the Holy Spirit in this space between the text and us may reveal the meaning of Jesus to us in ways that the details of the historicity of his life may not. From this text we can learn historic things and we can expound on or draw out theological ideas – and these are important, but revelation of God and the meaning of Jesus' life happens here at the overlap between the text and us. The meaningful encounter is here. Hanging out with Jesus happens here.

And no matter what I say today about the story of Nicodemus and Jesus, this is only the meaning that I have gleaned from this particular interaction with the text. No one sermon will ever capture it fully, rather, the text and our interaction with it “becomes a fountain of meaning whose waters can be endlessly gathered but never exhausted.”¹

With this framework in mind, let's turn to the story of Nicodemus and Jesus.

¹ Schneiders Sandra M. p. 124

As I'm sure you are aware Nicodemus is a Pharisee, or leader of the Jews, remember, someone whom the community has a hard time feeling sympathetic with, who comes to see Jesus at night. As a Pharisee, he is also known as a teacher. He knows things. He tells Jesus what he knows. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God. This religious expert, Nicodemus, whatever you may think of him, however you experience him when you hear this or read this, whether you resonate with him or feel distanced from him has had the courage to enter the space of interaction where meaning might unfold. The story itself has a way of asking us if we have the courage to move with him into an encounter with Jesus. Nicodemus is also part of the symbolic portrait of this story. A person who isn't quite sure (the darkness) but as Diem has I think accurately portrayed in her reading he is someone who wants to believe.

In response, to Nicodemus' assertion of what he knows, Jesus asks him a question that invites him to a deeper place of meaning. But the meaning is ambiguous because the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus is full of irony and words with double meanings.

The irony includes that even though they acknowledge each other as teachers, later on Jesus gently mocks Nicodemus' ability to teach when he says, you are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things (in verse 10).

And then there is the triple meaning of *anóthen* - born again, born anew or born from above. Like Nicodemus we might be naturally confused here.

Nicodemus tries to figure out what Jesus is saying, “Can someone enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus’ responds that one must be born of water (a human birth) and Spirit (a spiritual birth). The part that says “What is born of flesh is flesh is generally believed to refer to Nicodemus’ Jewish birth that makes him a “son of Abraham.” The spiritual birth that is open to everyone would make him also a son or child of God.

Another set of double meanings is the word *pneuma* which can mean wind or spirit. We cannot know either the origin or destination of the wind/Spirit.

Or what about the verses a bit later that talk about ascending and descending from heaven and the “lifting up” of the Son of Man (presumably on the cross,) just like Moses lifted up the Serpent in the wilderness. Clearly this connects Jesus with the larger narrative of God’s work of salvation and the role of Jesus in bringing life.

But with such a multi-layered dialogue, what keeps us coming back to this text?

Even after I read the commentaries and considered the history of interpretation of this text, I got the sense that there’s still more here that

needs to be revealed. An interpretation that have been helpful for some and not others includes, “Born again” theology where new birth has meant an abrupt change from one life to the next. If this has been understood as a one-way ticket to heaven with out a life of new behaviour, Menno Simons for one would object. In 1537 he wrote a treatise on *the new birth* that emphasizes repentance as the first step and instructs those born again to demonstrate the new birth in moral or “right” living.

Even so, the waters of the fountain of meaning are not exhausted by these interpretations.

In my interaction with the text this week, when I tried to listen to Jesus addressing us this is the meaning that unfolded.

What if new birth, whether by water or Spirit is actually talking about birth? Birth by water or Spirit, is not a ticket to heaven or even about behaviour. Birth is a complex and sometimes difficult process whereby a woman, fully embodied, moves with the ebb and flow of contractions, and through the profound physical effort of her body after hours or sometimes even days – eventually pushes a baby into the world.

And as soon as a birth takes place, if all has gone well, and sometimes it doesn’t go well, but if it does, right there at birth a complex relationship begins to unfold between parents and child.

I visited David and Damaris this week. And as I held Eli, or watched his parents hold him - and watched his facial expressions and listened to his

different baby sounds and cries and observed as he stretched and moved his hands and legs and as he squirmed and cuddled, I noted that both Damaris and David were attentive to every tiny piece of communication from this new little love of their life.

As they attended to and communicated with each other both parents and baby were learning every moment to live into a new experience of love.

Is being born of the Spirit really any different?

As each of us is born anew of a Mother God, or mothering Spirit is it possible to imagine that this birth is not just unequivocally joyful but may have been accomplished by hours or days of the ebb and flow of contractions, and intense effort on the part of God or Spirit?

And at that moment of birth, even spiritual birth, can we imagine the fragility and complexity of the unfolding relationship of love; multiple tiny communications and encounters until parent and child understand each other's love language, a language that includes real crying and hunger and need as well as tender nurture.

For God so loved the world that God sent God's child Jesus to us to demonstrate to us the love language that God and Jesus already shared and to reveal to us that by virtue of a spiritual birth a spiritual birth by a Labouring Feminine Divine Spirit we might know and participate in their love language too as a child or children of God.

If we continue to hang out with Jesus in the gospel of John, eventually the baby of this new birth will grow into a child and eventually into a friend of Jesus. Nicodemus makes this journey. The relationship matures with time, but each time we encounter Jesus in this place of meaning and revelation we are invited to enter more deeply into the mystery conversion, discipleship and especially in this text the mystery of the divine parent/child relationship. The birth that Jesus invited Nicodemus to experience would bring him out of the darkness into the light, would grant him life from now and forever and all of this was born of a mothering Spirit's great love.

Let me repeat something I said earlier, new birth, or re-birth or birth from above if it means birth at all is not a ticket to heaven or a commandment for new behaviours, but rather in a complex way unique to each one of us it is either the beginning of or the next stage of a relationship out of which flows a changed life and light and love.

John 20:31 helps us understand what went on in this passage by saying that Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Sometimes I still feel more or less in the dark like Nicodemus. With him, I say, and "what can this mean?" and Jesus gently chides me with and you call yourself a teacher?

But this passage doesn't leave me there, precisely because the relationship I've had with Jesus began a long time ago and there's still time to reveal to me things I currently don't see.

Gratefully, I know that I can keep coming back to a fountain of meaning here whose waters can never be exhausted. Here I encounter a God of love in Jesus who over and over again gives birth to mysteriously deepening relationships with all of us.