

2 Lent – Year A – March 23, 2011
Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17
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All week I've had the sneaking suspicion that the story about Nicodemus coming to see Jesus in the middle of the night is a lot like an episode from a soap opera. It seems to have all the hallmarks of a long running series, including double meanings, hidden agendas, clandestine meetings, deliberate misunderstandings that add twists to the plot, and perhaps more truth than most people can handle. It also connects us with some of the vital history that informs our own faith, as well as our future hope. In this reading, past, present and future merge and mingle, collide and create new meanings. Yet all the time, there's the constancy of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, running like a golden thread through the whole story, weaving it miraculously into our hearts and minds, and leading us deeper into relationship with Him.

The Gospel of John is full of ambiguous statements, comments, and symbols. How many of us, for example, thought that Nicodemus sneaking over to see Jesus in the middle of the night was done out of fear? A midnight meeting that effectively hides his curiosity and secret admiration for this teacher from his friends and colleagues. Indeed, we know from many other readings in Scripture that not many good things happen under cover of darkness. Judas leaves the Last Supper at night to betray Jesus to the Judean leaders. Nighttime is also described as the time of temptations, drunkenness, carousing, adultery, and all manner of vices. For the Gospel writer there are strong differentiations between the darkness of the world's sinful tendencies and the Light of world, who is Jesus Christ. On the other hand, in Jewish rabbinical practice, those who studied the Law during the quiet of the night hours were highly regarded. Therefore, Nicodemus may just have been taking advantage of that time of day to show Jesus just how serious he is in his questions.

The next part is just as confusing. Jesus doesn't answer Nicodemus' question directly, but seems to answer another question entirely. Well, maybe! You see Nicodemus has spoken to Jesus using the title Rabbi and teacher, and even acknowledged that Jesus' gifts are clearly from God. However, Jesus' response should tell Nicodemus right away that he's missed the point. While he might think he's flattering Jesus, he has been blind to the most crucial aspect of Jesus' identity as the Son of God. Ironically, Nicodemus visits Jesus during the night, but doesn't recognize Jesus as the Light of the world. There's quite a lot of humor in this passage. Jesus has just told Nicodemus that he can't see the kingdom of God without being born from above. That's another cue to Nicodemus, one of the highly respected spiritual leaders of his people, that Jesus is speaking of spiritual, and divine matters. Yet Nicodemus seems to deliberately misunderstand and take what Jesus says literally. I envisage women the world over laughing even as we cringe at the picture that springs to mind, because of the absurdity of Nicodemus' suggestion that a grown man might enter his mother's womb again.

Jesus tries again, by telling Nicodemus that to be a part of God's kingdom, one has to be born anew or born again by water and Spirit. For many modern-day Christians, being "born again" has taken on a rather unfortunate connotation, conjuring images of pushy evangelists demanding to know if we're saved, or offering frightening images of a eternal hell and damnation. Anything that distracts us from the amazing gift of God's grace by faith in Jesus Christ is worse than unfortunate. So let's try and set aside any negative suggestions here and focus on what Jesus is offering. To be born anew of water and Spirit is God's gift. We might conclude that water is a reference to baptism, but the longstanding Jewish tradition of using water for cleansing, purification, and as a sign of repentance is just as important here. Furthermore, Jesus *is* the living water, as we will hear on Sunday in His meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well. John the Baptist describes Jesus as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. It is therefore only by accepting the divine gift that our eyes are opened, that the blindfold is removed, and that we move from groping around in the dark to seeing clearly by the light of God's grace through our faith in Christ Jesus. The birth metaphor is a huge surprise to Nicodemus, and his response express as much. However, Jesus is handing us all a

provocative invitation here, not a commandment. We are being invited to imagine how our relationship with God is to change, like the change from being a babe in the darkness of the womb, to growing up and becoming mature disciples of Christ, living each day in the His light, following in His steps, and leading others in the way. Being born anew is God's invitation, and God's work. Even the gift of faith is God's gift. Our part is to accept the gift, and become a follower of Christ, always seeking growth and intimacy with our Lord God. In that way, we become alive – vibrant with faith – and filled by the power of the Holy Spirit, which is so integral to our own identity and relationships with God and others. Being born anew is more than a confession of faith; it is faith in action, the daily joy of growing in obedience to God in Christ Jesus, without turning to false idols.

Idolatry has always been a huge temptation. As we say in the prayer for healing, there is no other name under heaven given for health and salvation than the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. The Greek word for salvation also means healing, and deliverance from evil. The Israelites experienced God's healing when Moses held up the staff of the serpent as a symbol of healing in the wilderness, and as a sign of God's grace. Yet the true meaning behind the sign was lost, Moses' serpent staff became an idol, and was later destroyed for that reason. For Christians, we worship the Lord our God in the person of Jesus Christ, who is our salvation and healing. Our faith in Jesus is God's gift through which the whole world will be reconciled to God's self. To be in right relationship with God is not just to passively accept His gift of salvation, but to have a lively relationship with Christ, and to pick up *our* cross daily.

For many of us picking up our cross daily is easier said than done. It's not unusual for any of us to have a hard time extending our living faith into the fullness of our daily lives beyond our community worship once or twice a week. We live in a pluralistic society. Religious expression is politically incorrect and sometimes even legally barred from the public forum. Faith has generally become a matter of individual choice and part of the private sphere of life rather than our public identity. However, as followers of Christ our identity as Christ's own is inseparable from our relationship with God in Christ Jesus. Publically or privately, we are called to live out our faith with integrity. Christianity is a way of life, and therefore a way of being in the world every day, not simply a weekly religious observance.

Like you and me, Nicodemus is being invited to see the world through the light of Christ's love from a spiritual perspective rather than through the eyes of the flesh. Our new vision helps us to integrate the past with the present. That gift helps us to seek forgiveness for our sins, reconciliation for broken relationships, and to give thanks for all the ways God has been working in our lives. Our new vision directs us to look to the future with hope, knowing the blessing that awaits us is everlasting life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Our future hope also informs and transforms our present lives. We can confidently live every day, free from fear, enfolded in God's steadfast love, with deep gratitude for all our blessings. As followers of Christ, we really don't need some cheesy escape from reality, especially not one found in TV land. The truth in Christ is so much better than fiction. Our real life in Him is abundant life, filled with God's grace and blessings, with hope, love and peace.

Amen.