

---

## *Sermon*

Homily from The Rev. Bill Harkins  
17 February 2008  
2 Lent Year A  
Genesis 12:1<sup>4</sup>; John 3:1<sup>17</sup>

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen. Good morning, friends, and welcome to Mikell Chapel on this second Sunday of Lent. In the Gospel text for today, we have a wonderful narrative involving a cautious academic type by the name of Nicodemus. I know him well, and so do you. He is secure in his orthodoxy<sup>1</sup> indeed it is from this vantage point that his life and vocation are lived out<sup>2</sup> and he is not inclined, personally or professionally, to put this in jeopardy. Even the very context of his conversation with Jesus, a secret, night-time meeting, suggests that Nicodemus is not keen to be seen engaged in deep dialogue with the one whom he calls "Rabbi"<sup>3</sup> teacher. One wonders if Nicodemus would be inclined to address Jesus in this fashion, or at all, in the light of day.

From his position of orthodoxy Nicodemus had no doubt heard of the early events of Jesus' ministry: the dramatic calling of the disciples on the shores of Galilee; the miracle of the wedding at Cana; the cleansing of the Temple. I imagine that Nicodemus was curious about these stories in part because they suggested a ministry not exactly bound by the laws of orthodoxy. Other laws seemed operative, if indeed "law" is the appropriate term. I suspect that the good Pharisee was curious, deeply curious about Jesus, and this draws me to him because it is so human of him. He let his curiosity lead him into conversation. This may be our first clue to one meaning of this text<sup>4</sup> it involves the invitation to relationship, and to the potential for transformation that all relationship involves. But I am ahead of myself.

As we heard from the Gospel text for today, Jesus tells Nicodemus what is most necessary for salvation: "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." It is not a physical birth one needs, but rather a transformation, a reorientation, metanoia<sup>5</sup> a turning around in relation to God, self, and other. From the perspective of orthodoxy, the only view from which Nicodemus is able or willing to see this metaphor, Jesus' requirement for salvation is nonsense. How can a grown human being find a way<sup>6</sup> any way<sup>7</sup> to begin life again? How can what is old be made new, what is lost be found, and what is dark become light? How can what is past be given a future, and what has died, be given new life? Jesus compounds Nicodemus' confusion by saying that no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the spirit. And, Jesus compares the Spirit to the mystery of the wind, which one can only observe, but cannot control. We get a lovely clue to the meaning of this term from the etymology of spirit from both the Greek and the Hebrew. The Greek *pneuma*, and Hebrew *ruach* also mean "wind." And like the wind, God's Spirit cannot be contained, compartmentalized, captured in our human terms, such as Torah<sup>8</sup> the law<sup>9</sup> or all the categories we create to organize our existence. The Spirit is transcendent, and not subject to such laws.

As a priest whose vocational tapestry takes me in many different directions during the week, I find it fascinating that the subject of the mother's womb enters the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. For the cautious, academic man of the Torah, the nighttime dialogue with Jesus prompts an anxious response: "How can a grown-up enter the mother's womb a second time, and be born again? Nicodemus is not being obtuse or prosaically literal in this response. I suspect that on some level he understands, perhaps subconsciously, exactly what Jesus is suggesting, and it is more than he can take in at the moment. The kind of transformation Jesus is talking about takes place in sacred, liminal space not confined by space or time, or by the laws of Torah. I imagine were I in Nicodemus' shoes, I would ask the same questions, if for no other reason than to buy a little time to take it all in. But the reference to the womb is telling. In the Hebrew, the word for compassion is

rachamim" meaning, literally, "wombish." It is in the context of our immersion in the human condition, in community, that we are called forth to be compassionate, to suffer with the other in relationship. In therapeutic terms, the co-creation of relationships of healing constitute what Donald Winnicott called a "holding environment," a kind of evocation of the womb from which we all came, and of the "womb of God" "rachamin" in which we are all held and loved. To co-create this sacred space is to invite the other into relationship, in the service of suffering with them and taking action to do Hesed" justice and loving-kindness, in response to that suffering. Moreover, it is at the heart of psychotherapeutic wisdom that in precisely such "womb-ish" relationships persons are transformed; change occurs, lives are renewed and life-giving possibilities are born. This sacred space is not limited to the therapeutic milieu. This womb of compassionate relationship is one we can, and should enter over and over again, and thus we are constantly being born again, in community, in Christ. The possibility for its co-creation is ever present. It comes and goes around us all the time, in the form of the Divine Spirit, requiring only our participation in it to bring it to full life. It is like sailing a kite into the wind on an early spring day, giving form, substance, and color to all the possibilities borne on a wind now made visible, holding onto that imaginative, creative connection for dear life. Sometimes this openness to mystery is anathema to juridical laws of spiritual certainty" the kind that Nicodemus wanted to hold on to. What did he ultimately learn from his encounter with Jesus? I am not sure. But we do know that he was later to be there to defend Jesus to the Pharisees, and it was Nicodemus who brought the spices to anoint the body of Jesus after the crucifixion. We do know that much. Perhaps that is all we need to know.

My sisters and brothers, in this season of Lent, I invite you to pay attention" prayerfully and intentionally" to how and in what ways you encounter others on the winds of the Holy Spirit. What chance encounter in relationship might be an invitation to compassion, to enter the womb of God's loving embrace? Jesus seems to be saying to Nicodemus, and by extension to us all, that whatever happens will be shrouded in mystery, and will require our discernment and attentiveness. It may be prompted by sadness, fear, anger or joy. It may be ambiguous, like canning fog, or as clear as the clap of thunder during a late February storm. We do not know where it comes from or where it goes, but one thing is certain: it is informed and empowered by the boundless love of God. Jesus came to save and not to condemn, and that love, like the spirit, wind, ruach, Pneumas, is everywhere. We are born again each time we say "yes" to the Divine gift of love, of freedom from condemnation, to the life-giving, transformative possibilities of relationships of compassion, in Christ. As the poet and novelist Wendell Berry has said so well:

The incarnate Word is with us,  
Is still speaking, is present  
Always, yet leaves no sign  
But everything that is,.. Amen.

Comments? Contact Bill Harkins at: [BHarkins@stphilipscathedral.org](mailto:BHarkins@stphilipscathedral.org)