
Not John 3:16, Again!

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A Sermon by Canon Carolynne Williams
Second Sunday of Lent
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
Gospel: John 3:1-17

Every time that this text from John rolls around, I look at the rota to determine if I am scheduled to preach. There are only so many ways that a preacher can preach about Nicodemus and being born again. If you were not listening closely, our gospel has within it that well known citation from John. Just the sight of that particular citation from scripture being seen on a hand lettered sign held up for the cameras and reflected on a television screen, touches a place within us in one manner or another. You know the scripture:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life." (John 3:16)

Now, I could have focused on another part of the text, but it is better to go ahead and get this out of the way, so that the possibilities of this sermon being listened to that is about being "born again", will not fall on ears that are not listening.

When one looks at the crowds at basketball games, or football games and occasionally during a golf game, one will see a placard or a hand-lettered sign with the biblical citation John 3: 16. The citing will cause a visceral reaction in one direction or another. Either one will agree with the citation or not agree with it or wonder about what the words are or, one will react totally negative all without saying a word.

Nicodemus, was a prominent leader and known in the business community. He was a Pharisee. He had been watching Jesus from afar and was beginning to listen to Jesus and follow him in his thoughts and belief, because of the signs that Jesus was giving to the people. The people were seeing these signs that Jesus was giving and were listening to these words being said by Jesus and were following him because they wanted to know more about the heavens and the earth.

Nicodemus has been telling a few select people in his community that Jesus is a teacher from God. He understands that the teachings that he is hearing from Jesus are in accord with God's mind because he is a scholar.

Nicodemus was the first person to hear about being born again. And when he heard about this, he questioned the concept. How can this be?" How can anyone be born after having growing old?" (John 3:4)

He is saying this is not possible. I am a man of reason and there are many things that I understand, but this is not possible. If you say that this is possible then tell me how?

His questioning was done undercover, in secret. He goes to Jesus at night to have this conversation because he does not want to appear to be sympathetic to what he is hearing Jesus say. He does not want others in the community to question his mental stability or even worse, to appear that he needs someone other than himself. And he certainly does not want to

be mistaken for a disciple. You know the saying "association brings on assimilation."

He is beginning to understand that in order to be born again, in order to become a new person, has nothing to do with re-entering the mother's womb. It all has to do with becoming a new person in Christ. Becoming a new person through the water and the spirit.

Nicodemus does not want to commit himself and finds that his committing to being born again through the water and the spirit is irrevocable. Unless, he is reborn of the water and the spirit- baptism- he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus understand being born of water because of the baptism of John the Baptist. And being born of the spirit was leading him to question Jesus undercover. At night. He was trying to keep his desire to understand more under wraps: A secret.

He did not want those who respected him to find out that he was curious about something that would say to his contemporaries, I have to depend on someone other than myself. I have to look to a place that I am not quite sure about, to find out about the mystery that I am hearing about and seeing signs of. What will the others think? They may take their business elsewhere.

He did not want to be embarrassed by his seeking to understand committing to being "born again."

He did not want to openly, join the others who were seeking to be reborn.

He would not tolerate being laughed at. Or run the risk of being less than intelligent as he was viewed. Remember he sat on the council of the Sanhedrin; the decision makers council which was made up of Sadducees and a few Pharisees.

In his questioning, he could not understand how one could be transformed. He did not get it as to how one who had seen the miracles of God performed had to become a changed person.

How does one accept something that they are not convinced about?

How does one die to oneself and allow that light within themselves to come alive?

How do I become less selfish and less focused on me?

Even when we can see the work of God in our lives as Nicodemus saw the miracles performed, he did not see the Full intent of those miracles. "To grasp the blessings in our lives, we must perceive God's full intent to restore us".

God's intent is to restore us through transformation and through the nurturing of human relationships. That is one of the reasons why it is so difficult, at times, to be hopeful in the promise. The difficulty for Nicodemus and the difficulty for us today is understanding that we must trust God in all things. Not just in those things that we do understand; but all things.

When we allow the work of God to transform us, through the water and the spirit: when we remember that we are marked as Christ" own forever through the waters of baptism and sealed through the Holy Spirit through the light of Christ within, then we can light our light shine. We don't have to wait until dark as Nicodemus did, to go to God.

We don't have to wonder if we are going in the direction that God is leading us when many seem to be busying themselves with more interesting and popular things to do.

Believing the full intent of God to work within us: that is God's power and God's glory being revealed to and through us will make the difference. Being a part of God's gathered community is where we glean some of the answers that God has for us.

The full intent of God's message to us when his word says to love one another as I have loved you, only God knows. " It is God who will give birth in water and spirit. Rebirth is God's gift to give, God's work to accomplish, and it is God who labors to bring us new life.

When Abraham's faith was challenged because he had to trust God completely, he grew closer to God. His pilgrimage lead him to a place of restoration and love, not to a place of judgment.

As we think about God being a God who loves us, then we can begin to understand that God desires to restore us to wholeness. We are offered the gift of blessings, not judgment.

Our God is one who loves us and tells us that we are his children and we are to believe and trust in him.

Jesus said these words to those who were gathered in the temple. He was giving words of encouragement. He was saying to them that even though you come to this place, this temple of worship, this house of God, be sure that your trust is in the righteous place. Yes, the stones are beautiful and the gifts dedicated to God are certainly a part of the adornment. But, as for these things that you see, the days will come when one stone will not be left upon another." All will be thrown down" (NRSV Luke 21:6)

In other words enjoy the beauty that you have created, worship in the beauty of his holiness, but do not put your complete trust in the stone, Do not put all of your confidence in that which can be destroyed. Put your trust in me, "I am in my Father and my Father is in me."

For those who find that there is no need for God in their lives, for those who worship other images and things, for those who perhaps love God, but not as much as something else in their lives, hopefully will not be led astray. Being led astray is always a possibility.

Being a Christian is not for the fainthearted. Living as a Christian is not for those who believe in God only sometime. That is, in a crisis time when things seem to be out of control. In these perilous times times you and I must know what our foundation is built on.

When Jesus was teaching in the temple, the disciples were asking questions about what was going to happen in the future? They were asking for signs of things of things to come. He tells them in so many words to not put their trust in earthly holdings. He goes on to say why. He says that there will be famines, earthquakes, floods and droughts, but through all of this, we as believers are encouraged to endure.

We as worshippers of the one true God have a place. That place is standing and sharing your life as a Christian with others. This gospel offers not a way of predicting the end of the world, but offers spiritual resources to cope with adversity and hardship. In times of distress, "do not be terrified". (verse 9) This gospel is about impermanence of our lives. Yet we know that we have a strong faith.

This faith is evidenced by worshipping Sunday after Sunday and living a Christian life. This faith is encouraged as our hearts are strengthened day by day. Not through our own efforts. But through the grace of a loving God. A God who understands the valleys within us and the high places that are deep within us. This gospel today is about our world, our human inconsistencies that sometimes lead us astray yet the permanence of God's kingdom is ever present.

Nothing is everlasting, nothing is for permanent except the promise of God's love. There are many important things that we as Christians can carry with us. These can be reminders to us as we walk with our neighbor who is at home asleep right now or who sees no need for God at this juncture in their lives. Or perhaps in our families where everything else seems to have a priority and God is in the middle or at the bottom of the list.

Being a Christian and living such a life is not for the fainthearted. It calls for us to see the signs, as they are given to us in scripture, Believe that the stones in all of their beauty will not always stand, and spread the message of God's grace. Not the message of being afraid. For God is with us even to the end.

"We believe in the God who was and is and is to come; It is God who controls not our beginning, but our end as well."
(*Feasting on the Word*, page 281, Year C).

The next time that you see the citation of John 3:16 on a placard or you hear the words

"Ye must be born again", don't be put out or turned off or disgusted, just remember Nicodemus has taken care of that for us. He has already asked the questions, the good questions and the not so intelligent questions and was given an answer: "Ye must be born again".

Just think about the water and the spirit and move on. Move forward. Be carried by the impulses.

Amen.

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