

A-Lent 2, 2008  
St. Luke's, Renton, WA  
Kevin Pearson, Preacher

John 3.1-17

This morning we meet Nicodemus—a fellow traveler on faith's journey. Nicodemus shows up a couple more times in John's gospel, so we know a little bit about him. He's an adult, more affluent than most, and a Pharisee. His class of people is well-established in society and used to the way things are. Most of Jesus' struggles in the gospels are with Pharisees. That's how it is when your heart is on fire with good news and you encounter folks who are content as they are. "Nothing's perfect," I might respond, "sure I'm sorry about the ways and means of the world that are experiencing agonizing defeat, but I'm doing OK." Jesus found that attitude ... frustrating. In Nicodemus, we see a person of that culture and that class, yet also someone whose attention has been pricked by Jesus. Maybe Nicodemus isn't quite as OK with things-as-they-are as we thought. Something has disturbed him, perhaps a gnawing question, perhaps he sees Jesus in himself as a youngster and wants to offer some advice, some words of wisdom for negotiating the world. Maybe he just yearns for a conversation with someone who isn't stuck in one way of thinking and reacting and sees, in Jesus, someone who will hold his own. Whatever his reasons for engagement, Nicodemus comes to Jesus, but he comes in the night, under the cloak of darkness. Nicodemus shows up two more times, the last time, in full daylight, he takes the bold action of caring for Jesus' crucified body. We may well surmise that here, in the beginning of the story, Nicodemus travels with a bit more trepidation. He comes as one who is drawn to Jesus and his vision, but cautiously. What would others think were they to see a powerful Pharisee encountering Jesus? No, this is a private meeting along the pathway of Nicodemus' faith journey.

In his formidable fashion, Jesus immediately challenges Nicodemus with his invitation: "You must be born from above." "How can this be after having grown old?" Nicodemus asks. "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jews put great stock in the passing of faith from generation to generation through the family's ancestral lines. Ancestry mattered. Did you come from a good family? What was your parentage? Jesus—one of suspect parentage—has another way. "What is born of the flesh is flesh, but what is born of the Spirit is spirit." "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." Jesus invites Nicodemus on a new path of being baptized in water and touched by the Spirit of God, and to see *this* as his primary parentage, to see *this* as his beginning on the journey of faith, and his entrance into the kingdom of God. Jesus is adamant that a person cannot even see, recognize, appreciate, understand the concept of the kingdom of God unless she is born from above.

We part with Nicodemus for awhile. Just know that in future meetings, he stands more and more on the side of Jesus, raising the appropriate questions before his own people. In our meetings it is clear that he moves along in his own faith journey from the trepidation of this initial encounter with Jesus, to someone who takes great and bold risks for his devotion to Jesus and his vision.

In our brief Hebrew bible lesson, the Lord calls to Abram and says "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." "Pick up and go from the place where you have a goodly heritage, where people know and respect you, where you are comfortable, wealthy and privileged and move ... I'll show you where you're going later."



One of the main themes of our new class called “Our Common Life”—a class that is open to all of you, a 4-session class we are offering on an on-going basis—one of the main themes of the class is that, just as St. Luke’s is a church for all people, all people of St. Luke’s are invited to an intentional faith journey. Its one thing to make one’s way into this house of prayer, and it’s another to find, here, the invitation, encouragement, and support for an intentional pilgrimage of faith. That pilgrimage, that journey is a movement toward greater faithfulness: more fidelity, deeper trust, greater reliance upon the relationship each of us has with God.

Faith, it seems to me, is not a noun. It is not so much a thing one chooses or possesses. Rather, faith is much more a verb and an action verb, at that. It is a practice, a way of living life. We make our way on the journey of faith by practice and reflection, and more practice.

As we saw with Nicodemus, the journey of faith is a counter-cultural and counter-intuitive process. It goes against the grain of those of us who learned that the only thing we deserve is what we have earned. For the journey of faith is a practice of relying upon the love, grace, and mercy of God that is always and ever available to us at every turn and circumstance. Unearned. Practicing faith, it seems to me, is about relinquishing my cares to God, relaxing my anxiety into God’s mercy, aligning my life with the promptings of the Spirit of love.

Journeys have beginning places, mile markers, tangled paths taking us places we never dreamed of going, and a few straight shots here and there. And while my faith journey’s end is veiled in mystery, as has been most of the path forward, I know I have marked a beginning and many times have taken stock my progress on the path. The image of a journey or pilgrimage affords us the understanding that a life of faith, like a good story, has a beginning and an eventual ending, with a well-traveled road in between.

Yesterday we celebrated the life of Vivian Boyington on the occasion of her death and one poem read by her grandson was about the dash between the dates of one’s birth and death. In part, it goes like this:

He noted that first came the date of her birth  
And spoke of the following date with tears,  
But he said what mattered most of all  
Was the dash between those years.

For that dash represents all the time  
That she spent alive on earth  
And now only those who loved her  
Know what that little dash is worth.

So when your eulogy is being read  
With your life’s actions to rehash  
Would you be proud of the things they say  
About how you spent your dash?

The dash is the journey. The invitation of this parish church and the Lenten invitation, is to travel it intentionally. The point is not to get from birth to death in a straight line, but to move as one who has been birthed from the love and wisdom of eternity, from the source of life and the wisdom of life itself. And then to follow as the Spirit blows and comes, surprisingly from this direction and then from that. Born anew from this eternal source, we are able to make out a vision of the kingdom of God. At first imperceptibly, then maybe confusingly, but increasingly



clearly we begin to see the way love works at us, how mercy undoes us, how grace transforms us, how the Spirit of God reveals new glory as we pass through veil upon veil.

Whatever you have heard in the past, be assured now that God does not come to condemn you, but to take you into her great arms of love and show you the path of life, love, joy, and peace. And God is speaking still. God is loving still. God is embracing still. God is still showing the way. Listen for her.