



Nicodemus
Rev Cate Thorn

Year A, Lent 2
Gen. 12:1-4a John 3:1-17
5 March 2023

Here we are the second Sunday in our Lenten traverse to Easter, journeying in the company of one another, attentive to those among us preparing for confirmation and/or baptism. Lent's season has its own culture and intention, as Diana said last week Lent's three actions include Whakawhirinaki, drawing closer to God in prayer, Whakamārie drawing closer to our neighbour through almsgiving and Whakapūmau drawing closer to ourselves in fasting. All three deeply rooted in the idea of love.

The biblical readings we hear in Lent repeat each year. Perhaps, accustomed to hearing them, it's hard for them to speak freshly in our ears. But each year we enter the season of Lent isn't the same as the previous. We're not the same, for a year changes us and our circumstances, just as the world around us has been changed. So let's lean into the readings, let's lean into what they might speak to us now in **this** journey to Easter, in **this** time with who we are in this world, with all its chaos and clamouring demands.

In the gospel Nicodemus appears suddenly and rather unexpectedly. Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Passover, by all accounts gaining in popularity amongst the masses, not so much amongst the religious elite. This is the first time Nicodemus appears in John. Under cover of dark he comes to speak to Jesus. Under cover of dark, they say, because he was a Pharisee, a leader of the Sanhedrin and associating with Jesus was ill advised. But John's gospel also likes to contrast darkness and light, of people seeing with increasing clarity – it could be this device is also at play.

But for now, Nicodemus comes and says, or seems more to ask with a statement, "We know 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.” Let’s just note these signs thus far include changing water to wine, at his mother’s insistence, at the wedding in Cana and driving the traders and money changers out of the temple. The latter driven by ‘Zeal for his Father’s house’, according to the words of John.

We can only assume that Jesus’ actions and passion have called out something in Nicodemus. Nicodemus is brave enough, or some might say foolish enough, to enquire further. There’s something here Nicodemus recognises. Even though he’s a religious teacher he’s willing to press the edge of his certainty of what God expressing might look like.

Jesus response to Nicodemus isn’t logical. The way the passage unfolds, nothing makes sense from Nicodemus perspective. We enter the repartee: “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’ and Nicodemus literalist response ‘can one be born again from his mother’s womb?

Last week in the Lenten study of this text the question was asked about the Greek words for born “from above” or “again.” In Greek the expression *anōthen*, can mean either ‘again’ or ‘from above.’ Nicodemus chooses the literal (rather than the figurative) meaning of *anōthen*.

Most theologians recognise that Nicodemus knew Jesus wasn’t speaking of literal rebirth. Theologian Charles Ellicott suggests that a “method of Rabbinic dialogue, is being deployed. [Nicodemus] presses the impossible meaning of the words in order to exclude it and to draw forth the true meaning. ‘You cannot mean that a man is to enter the second time into his mother’s womb and be born. What is it, then, that you do mean?’¹ Jesus expresses surprise, perhaps ironically that ‘a teacher of Israel’ doesn’t understand the concept of spiritual rebirth.

If Jesus was “exercising a little rabbinical irony instead of divine judgement, [i]t changes our place in the story; suddenly there’s room

¹ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/john/3.htm>

for our ignorance too! Nicodemus reminds us that even the best educated and most authoritative among us are still searching.”²

Let’s reflect on this portrayal of Nicodemus who comes to Jesus under cover of darkness to press his enquiry. Nicodemus is grounded in a religious tradition, his identity comes through and from the position he holds, he’s got power. And yet he’s willing to step toward this untried, young upstart who’s making waves and gaining in the popularity stakes. In doing so Nicodemus acknowledges, thus validates Jesus. He also has humility to ask rather than assume he knows the authority enlivening Jesus’ actions.

Remember, other than turning water into wine, the sign Jesus did in the presence of God prior to this meeting with Nicodemus was to upend temple practices, violently overturn the religious status quo of his time. Might such signs foreshadow disruption by naming deceit and self-deception, signs that threaten rather than reassure?

When we enter the context of scripture, religion is centre stage, that’s the point, it’s the topic. Religion can seem to be central to all of life, to the whole of the world depicted. But the reality is its unlikely religion had the universal influence we imagine. Church today is pretty much part of the status quo, our practices mimic those of the world around us, a bit like money changing and temple trading.

What signs would cause us to venture to ask, even quietly under cover of darkness, what action would draw us to enquire whether the things done couldn’t be done apart from the presence of God? Do we think we know what a done in the presence of God sign would look like? Or perhaps more honestly in our wary of divine presence days, we’ve no expectation at all?

How brave are we to step as Nicodemus did, away from the power our status grants us? Let’s not limit ourselves to a religious silo, how brave are we to step toward that which is disrupting the status quo in our world. Acknowledge thus validate those who name the deceit and self-

² Bartlett, D. L., & Taylor, B. B. (2010). *Lent Through Eastertide*. Westminster John Knox Press. 73

deception borne out in a climate in crisis, in economic priorities that destroy, signs that threaten rather than reassure.

Nicodemus appears two other times in the gospel of John. At the end of chapter seven, to Pharisees furious at Jesus, Nicodemus dares say, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" Lastly, Nicodemus brings to the burial rite of Jesus "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about 100 pounds."

Nicodemus remains a Pharisee, yet he also exhibits a remarkable faithfulness to Jesus. A man in the shadowy side-lines of the story, deeply, quietly faithful, risking vulnerability. Drawn as he was to/by Jesus, he was willing to call out for justice and ask for accountability in the face of open hostility, humbly honouring the one he discerned could not do these signs apart from the presence of God.

We're on a Lenten journey, together, in a world we share. We embark on this type of journey because of a particular faith story. We walk the way of ancestors such as Nicodemus and Abram. Abram chose to step beyond their lived experience. Who chose to step from the known, toward a life of flourishing. Who chose uncertainty. Who chose to trust that the divine bringer of life would sustain them and fulfil the promise made. From all he knew, Abram went, from all the ways he was known, his rooted identity, his turangawaewae. Abram chose to let go, to forfeit his power, the promise made of a future of flourishing depended on it. In our fragile times are we too being called to step from our habits and ways of being into the disruptive, wild wind of divine Spirit coming from and going to a way of flourishing realised as we enlive it.