

Year A: Lent 2 Gen 12:1-4a; Ps 121; Rom 4:1-5, 13-17; Jn 3:1-17
St. Barnabas, Florissant: March 08, 2020

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.....

The old man hurries down the dark street and slips into an even darker doorway to catch his breath. As he peers up and down the street, he can see no one else out and about. "That's good," he thinks to himself, as he breathes deeply and concentrates on slowing his pounding heart.

The gray figure then relaxes back against the wooden doorway, in the cover of darkness, and enjoys the luxury of closing his watchful eyes for just a moment. "WHY am I doing this?" he asks himself for the tenth time. "WHY am I risking my reputation, maybe even my very life, for this? SURELY this is madness!"

As he drew another breath, he reminds himself of just what his reputation and his life mean. He is, after all, not only a member of the Pharisees (and a GOOD one, he had to admit), but also a member of the Sanhedrin and a teacher of Torah. He had studied at the finest institutions, and his degrees (both academic and honorary) covered the walls of his study. His family pedigree is equally impressive, and his personal wealth is proof of that.

"Yes, this is a fool's errand," he tells himself, "and I should just turn around and head for home right now."

But, just at that moment, he is jolted out of his thoughts by a scrap of dusty cloth that is carried out of nowhere by the night breeze and deposits itself at his feet. This startling interruption is enough to remind him of the reason for his night-time mission: “I’m doing this because something is MISSSING from my life. All the degrees, all the prestige, they just don’t seem to be enough anymore. I’m probably out of my mind, but this wandering Galilean teacher just MIGHT have something to say that will help.”

He pulls his cloak tighter around him and starts once again up the dark street.

He isn’t too familiar with this part of the city, and he passes it twice before he finds the right doorway. He looks once again up and down the street before he knocks; the door is quickly pulled open, and he can see the outline of a large, rough man in the soft light spilling into the street from the other side of the doorway. “What do you want?” demands the man in a thick Galilean accent. “I am Nicodemus,” the old man replies, “and I’ve come to meet with the Teacher.”

As Nicodemus mentions his name, the large figure, whom Nicodemus can now see has thick, bushy red hair, and an unkempt beard to match, steps backward and motions for Nicodemus to go past him into a surprisingly spacious courtyard. Nicodemus can see that Jesus is already sitting there --- waiting for this teacher of Israel to come to him perhaps?

PAUSE

It's late now, so Nicodemus comes right to the point: "Rabbi, we know that 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." Nicodemus means to set a respectful tone, even with this self-taught wandering rabbi, but Jesus' response confuses him.

"No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above, without being born again." The eyes of this Jesus are piercing, and Jesus looks deep into the eyes of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is flustered, and embarrassed by his confusion. "What do you mean? How can anyone be born after having grown old?" "This conversation is definitely NOT going well," Nicodemus thinks to himself, "but there is something about this Galilean...."

"No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit," Jesus says to Nicodemus, "what is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'" Jesus leans back against the trunk of an olive tree and looks up at the leaves, which are swaying in the breeze. He sighs deeply as he continues, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus is really baffled now. This is NOT what Nicodemus had expected to hear. Where are good, clear, theologically-sound answers? "How can these things be?" he asks.

Jesus looks closely at Nicodemus. “Are you a teacher of Israel, and you do not understand these things?” Nicodemus is a good and sincere Jew, looking for the Kingdom of God, awaiting the coming of God’s Messiah. How can HE, of all people in Israel, not understand what Jesus is telling him?Jesus sighs again.

PAUSE

Why is it that we hate to have our preconceived notions upset? Why is it that we are befuddled, and maybe just a little angry, when God doesn’t behave the way we expect God to behave? Why is it that we believe life can go on just the way it is, that we can continue to living our comfortable, familiar lives, even when the Spirit comes blowing into the dark corners of our lives to turn things upside-down?

It seems to me that this whole season of Lent is concerned with EXACTLY the answers to these questions. We’ve seen Jesus driven by the wind of the Spirit into the desert where Jesus has to ask himself tough questions and to be tested.

We’ve heard Jesus say that we must DENY ourselves... we must die to ourselves. What that really means is that we have to surrender to the action of the Spirit who wants to dismantle the false self we’ve constructed inside....that false self which separates us one from another, especially from those most different from us....that false self which relies on familiar comforts and credentials, upon achievements, upon success....in order to feel important and valued. No....not an easy task, this process of being born from above.

PAUSE

We have NO less problem in dealing with this challenge than did Nicodemus in his night-time encounter with Jesus. The Spirit of Jesus blows FROM we know not where, and drives us into places we'd rather not go. But letting go of control, REAL dying to self, in order that we might be transformed, in order that a TRUE self can be born anew, that a NEW self can be born from above, IN us, is the REAL challenge of Lent, and of the entire Christian journey.

PAUSE

Sisters and brothers, it's not an EASY challenge. But this transforming work was begun in us when we were baptized with water and the Holy Spirit, and the job goes on,.....little by little, during Lent, and during the entire journey of our lives.

Sometimes our progress in this transforming work seems discouragingly slow, but Jesus reminds us that God didn't send Jesus to condemn us for our human weakness, but to SAVE us....from sinfulness, and from ourselves. BELIEVE that promise, and surrender to the Spirit so, as our old selves are now dying with Jesus Christ, our new and true selves will be born anew with Jesus on Easter morning.

AMEN.