Sermon on Lent 2 Year A John 3:1-17

During the Sundays of Lent and then following on into the Easter season, we’re exposed to John’s gospel and one of the distinguishing features of John is that the stories are generally longer than anything we find in Matthew, Mark or Luke.

They are stories filled with dialogue and discourse and none of them can easily be reduced to a main point.

John has the supreme mystical talent of opening the possibility that each of us is actually inside the story even if we are reading it for the first time.

Occasionally I’ve had the privilege of someone who’s been one of the elites in society, coming and talking to me about their spiritual life or lack thereof.

When I was serving in Saskatchewan I struck up a friendship with a judge who would occasionally show up at our noon midweek Eucharist. Since there were only a few older folks present he felt he wouldn’t be spotted by his legal establishment friends.

After the service he’d complain to me about how awful of a person he was, how he couldn’t stop hating certain people, including certain people who he worked with including some of those who repeatedly came before him as defendants.

I’d mumble super helpful things like “well, you don’t have to be an awful person.” And he’d stare at me like I was only one on earth who didn’t understand the human condition.

He wouldn’t be the only one who has looked at me that way including my children and dear partner!

I certainly didn’t understand at the time how close my friend was to Nicodemus in life situation and sensibility. At the time I guess I judged him (bad pun I know) for not having the courage to show up at the Sunday Eucharist. But as I got to know him better I began to recognize his type; a person who was at ease in terms of societal position and personal wealth but whose soul was far from ease.

Years later, after I moved back to B.C., he called me to ask if I’d officiate at his mother’s funeral in Surrey and while we were together he told me more about his spiritual journey and the effect our conversation had had. I was stunned and heartened; God apparently moves in mysterious ways.

As with my friend so with Nicodemus: it’s easy to judge him. He’s sitting pretty, he has position, authority and no doubt is someone stuffed with cash; but yet he’s afraid of his colleagues knowing he’s come to inquire of Jesus: show your face in public, have some courage!

But that turns out to be a mere glimmer of pride because Nicodemus is doing something that I’ve come to deeply admire in people like my friend the judge: when you’ve got it made in the shade it’s hard to keep searching, to keep allowing your spiritual interest to be piqued when people like Jesus are a threat to the status quo that you’ve got a vested interest in protecting.

I’ve come to admire my friend and Nicodemus for actually risking a lot; for being willing to look stupid when such a thing is the kiss of death if it ever becomes public knowledge. Nicodemus takes the risk of allowing Jesus to unsettle him in profound and life-changing ways.

Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born *anothen.*”

Say what? I use the Greek word because our confusion may mirror some of the confusion on Nicodemus’ face at that moment.

Rather than “getting to the point,” Jesus playfully suspends what we think we might know about becoming connected to God, to what it means to live a spiritually connected life.

That’s because *anothen* is a forked path, a double-edged sword, a word that takes us in two directions at the same time.

It’s a word that’s creating ambiguity when our left-brain oriented culture craves clarity; it’s a word that would confuse the heck our of a google maps.

One way it’s been translated is “born-again,” a term you’ve all heard. Nicodemus, as an academic gets hung up on this path of meaning: “can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” It’s like a necessary misunderstanding, clearing the ground for what Jesus will say next.

Interestingly, North American spirituality with it’s straightforward pragmatic, technique-driven tendencies (just go into a Christian bookstore and you’ll find books on everything from “Christian toilet-training” to “Christian investing) has also become hung up on the more “literal” meaning of *anothen.*

Almost all evangelical churches use Bible translations like the New International Version that translate *anothen* as “born-again.” Over the decades a complete “born-again” culture has developed complete with conservative political beliefs and certain “litmus tests.”

The other, equally valid translation is “born from above,” a translation favoured in the Catholic and mainline churches and probably preferred because it’s not in the Bibles read in all the big box outlet churches.

This “reactionary” move has as many dangers as the other. Whereas “Born-again” has a visceral feel to it; anyone here seen or felt how messy birth is? “Born from above” sounds so disengaged, so non-bodily, that it ends up sounding like nothing of great importance.

But Jesus is not playing mind-games by introducing this kind of both/and theology; he’s opening Nicodemus’ mind and by extension ours as we allow ourselves to be drawn into the story.

And that is what he hopes we will do because we’re so self-protective that even when we’re curious we’re not ready to give over control to God’s Spirit. Christ invites Nicodemus, and now us, by laying down something that might either turn us away or turn us toward him.

If we stick with it we’re led onto the next stage of the encounter: John’s theologizing in which he dares speak to us of a world being saved, eternal life being offered by means of the Roman empire’s supreme technique of torture and death.

This is more than ambiguity; it’s nonsense! It’s like saying that the Covid 19 is good for the economy!

Or is it? We have referenced for us here that mysterious story of Moses and the serpents, in which a plague of snakes was decimating the people and then Moses was instructed to put a carving of a snake on a pole and when people looked at it they would be healed!

The symbol is still used around the world by medical professions as sign of healing though in a biblically illiterate culture it sure must be puzzling.

God seems determined to help human beings come to a better place through disasters, through plagues, indeed, whenever we come together to learn, to grow and begin to help a community heal in the midst of trouble we are already touching the God’s quality of life, the eternal.

The chief disaster being that humans crucified the Lord of Life only to have God turn that event into a “born-again/born from above” portal which you and I, which the world is invited to walk through.

Recently I re-watched the movie *Dr. Strange* in which Dr. Steven Strange (a Marvel Comic figure) loses his career as a famous neurosurgeon through a car accident.

In a desperate bid for healing he’s led to the lair of a great sorcerer, the Ancient One, who show him the truth of the universe and his identity in a very discombobulating way, analogous to what Jesus does for Nicodemus.

He struggles with what his new mentor is trying to teach him; in words that echo what Jesus and what modern psychology confront us with, he’s called to “change his mind” and “surrender his ego.”

He realizes that he’s never really been a “doctor for others,” but a doctor to soothe his sense of superiority.

Then he hears the words, “It’s not about you, it never has been.” You can assert yourself, you can hold onto your pride but unless you’re born *anothen* you won’t know God’s quality of life!

Did Nicodemus stay where he was? If all we had was this story we wouldn’t know, but he makes two more appearances, each one more courageous than before. In chapter 7 he will ask whether the leaders aren’t judging Jesus too hastily; they ridicule him for this.

And then right at the end, when all seems lost, at the most dangerous time, he risks everything to help claim Jesus’ body. He’s not stayed where he was, he’s kept praying about Jesus shared with him initially; he’s become *anothen*

Will you stay where you are or will you seek him out?