

“What About Lent?”
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February 28, 2010
John 3: 1-17

“Most of Jesus’ ministry took place, it appears, during the day, while it was light. But there are some episodes that took place at night. In the darkness, Jesus reached out to people, and in darkness, people reached out to Jesus. In the dark, when we cannot find our way and are unsure of which way to turn, that’s when Jesus is there for us. The darkness is a fine time to find Jesus or an opportunity for Jesus to find us.” (Pulpit Resource, p.33)

John 3: 1-17

On this second Sunday of Lent, we are presented with the timeless story of Nicodemus. This is a story from which mainline Protestants flee and evangelical Protestants cling; the whole notion of being ‘born again’ dividing Christendom yet one more way. But Nicodemus is a man of good intention, as are most of us, I believe. When Jesus offers him a new way of being, he is just faced with two world views that seem impossible to straddle. He has education, position and experience that all tell him Jesus is wrong. But in his heart of hearts, he knows that Jesus speaks only truth. In his heart of hearts, Nicodemus hears the voice of God coming through Jesus.

Don’t we all have that same problem? Isn’t that why we bristle when this passage comes up in the lectionary cycle during lent? We hear the voice of God coming through Jesus, but he asks us to change the way we look at the world—to change the way we are in the world—to become a new being in this world. And we can’t reconcile that any better than Nicodemus.

One of the commentators says: “Believing in Jesus can mean many rebirths in faith. Each rebirth is an occasion in which God calls for a renewed commitment and invites a person more deeply into the mystery of life with God. Abraham certainly experienced this when called to leave his homeland, to begin a family, to sacrifice his firstborn son, and to ratify his covenant with God. Every time Abraham thought he had done all that God expected, he was begotten again from above. Believers in Jesus should expect no less.” (Minister’s Manual, p. 267)

Personally, I like Nicodemus. He says the things aloud, that I think quietly in my head. He goes to Jesus under cover of darkness, so he can ask the questions that he’d be embarrassed to voice in public. After all, Nicodemus was a highly respected man—someone to whom others came to for advice. How would it look if he was seeking answers from this peasant man from Galilee? If he was publicly seen with Jesus, how long before the Sanhedrin would turn on him, too?

Lent is a time for looking for the answers to our questions. It is a time for asking God to erase the mistakes of our past and to guide us toward new ways of thinking and of being faithful. We can do this in a variety of ways.

I am an advocate of taking on something new for lent, as opposed to giving something up. Giving up chocolate, cigarettes and such may be good for your physical health, but it rarely does anything for your spiritual well-being. If giving up something you like or enjoy, for 40 days, helps you understand and appreciate Jesus’ sacrifice, then I apologize for misjudging your intent. I know

that giving up chocolate only makes me cranky, thus punishing those around me, and it does nothing for my relationship with God or others.

There are some actions and attitudes that are prime Lenten considerations. Giving up a prejudice for lent or trying to understand people who are different or who believes differently than you do are noble choices. We could look at our prejudices against people from the Middle East, or people of different races, or those with different sexual orientations, or even those from different political parties within our own nation. I know that being a red state or a blue state, holds meaning for many.

In order to do these things—to change our attitude-- means we need to take on something for lent. It means letting go of our pre-conceived ideas about right and wrong, and being open to learning something new. We can do this in many ways, by reading the bible or other inspirational literature. We can read biographies about people who struggled with our issues. We can start a discussion group or go on-line to get more information.

Another Lenten activity is to take on a new spiritual discipline. One church member told me that she's planning to spend time reading the psalms this lent. You could recharge your prayer life by experimenting with different kinds of prayer. You could come and walk the labyrinth with us today. You could do some reading about Jesus' life, especially to learn more about the last week of Jesus' life.

Sometimes we're timid to admit that we have questions, as Nicodemus did. Sometimes we're so busy with the busyness of life that we forget that there's so much more to life than what happens to us everyday. We forget that there is a whole spiritual dimension to this world that we are only, vaguely aware of.

Marianne Williamson says: "We need not wait for the world to become more mystical. Our problem is not that the world lacks magic; our problem is that we don't believe in it's magic. We do not show up fully for life, and then wonder why life is not showing up for us... The time to show up fully for life is right now." (Everyday Grace, p.33)

Lent gives us the time, the excuse, to ponder things we usually ignore or take for granted. Lent is the time when we are encouraged to explore our faith with all its educational and mystical ramifications. Lent was the time our ancestors in faith took pilgrimages to the Holy Land or to shines or great cathedrals seeking a new or renewed experience of God.

Nicodemus was looking for a renewed experience when he went to Jesus that night. He knew that he was missing something—he just didn't know what it was. He thought that Jesus might have the answers to the questions he didn't even know he was asking. He knew that Jesus was a 'teacher who has come from God', but didn't know what that would mean for himself. And was taken off guard by Jesus' response.

Jesus perceived Nicodemus to be the kind of person who would recognize that spiritual insight could come only from God. And that to be able to fully appreciate that insight, one would need to be of a totally new mindset, with a new heart and a renewed purpose. But, Nicodemus got

stuck on the language. He couldn't get passed the 'born again' part. He wasn't able to think outside the 'box' of his training and his role in the Sanhedrin. He was a product of his culture and got stuck in it. Sometimes, so do we.

So, what about Lent? What are we going to do this year? What are we going to ask of Jesus and ourselves?

Thanks be to God. Amen.