

TEXTS: Genesis 12:1-4; John 3:1-17

Outside the Box

During the season of Lent, we are going to do some eavesdropping. Each week we are going to listen in on someone's encounter with Jesus, as found in the gospel of John. It's a gospel completely unlike the others, described as "shallow enough for a child to wade in and deep enough to drown an elephant". So we'll be diving in, listening on Jesus' conversations with people this Lenten season. The hope is that in someone you may hear echoes of your own questions, or see something of your own life -- and then, hear more clearly Jesus' response, Jesus' revelation to you. So let's lean in and listen in on Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus...

(read John 3:1-17)

Under the cover of darkness, Nicodemus comes to Jesus. Three times in this brief encounter we are told about his credentials – he was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, a teacher of Israel. A man who knew Jewish law inside and out and was taught that it held all the answers. A man who had achieved status and recognition, who could hold his head high among his people. People recognized and respected him, deferring to him and giving him seats of honor. And yet, out he sneaks in the middle of the night, his head bowed low, so as not to be recognized. So that others might not realize that he was seeking something more. That maybe he thought there were answers to be found beyond the bounds of what he already knew.

There, in the dark, this teacher calls Jesus "teacher". "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." A humble acknowledgement from the one who used to think he had all the

answers. And an invitation for Jesus to shed some light on things there in the darkness. With faithful curiosity the question is implied “So, who are you?”

Jesus may not seem to directly answer Nicodemus, but he does engage and enlighten him. “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above”. Born from above is the phrase that is also translated born anew, or most familiarly, born again. There, that’s the one that gets us, isn’t it. It can make for some uncomfortable shifting in Presbyterian pews. “Born again” may be a phrase you’ve avoided before. Maybe it’s a discussion you’d just as soon be left out of -- or maybe that’s just it – the thought of being left out that concerns you. What if you didn’t have a moment of sudden conversion – what if you can’t point to a born again birthdate? Is that some sort of salvation litmus test? Born again gets our attention. It’s one of those loaded phrases that’s confusing, that’s controversial – dividing the spiritual haves and have nots. Born again. Is that something that Presbyterians really do? We’re just not sure what to make of it.

And neither was Nicodemus. His eyebrows furrowed, and his feet planted firmly in this world, he couldn’t translate Jesus’ other-worldly language. Maybe he was trying too hard, trying to make it make sense. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” I have this image of Nicodemus getting into the car my family owned back in the day. He sits down, buckles up, turns on the ignition and hears a voice – “Your door is ajar”. And the Pharisee furrows his brow, shakes his head and puzzles “How can a door be a jar?”

But his misunderstanding opens the door – so that Jesus can shed some more light on their encounter in the darkness. As we will see these next weeks, this is common to Jesus’

encounters in the gospel of John. Time and again, someone's inability to grasp what Jesus is saying becomes the occasion for further revelation of Jesus's identity. Jesus' message to Nicodemus about new birth, new life in the Spirit may have sent the Pharisee away with more questions than answers, but it also sent him wondering his way to faithfulness.

The Nicodemus encounter has a timeless message for Christians and the church. And in order for us to get the message, I want you to experience the encounter for yourselves. You'll need to find a pen or pencil, and some blank space in the bulletin. Now – make 9 dots – 3 rows of 3, equally spaced. Now, starting on whichever dot you like, draw 4 straight lines that will pass through each of the 9 dots – without lifting your pen from the paper. Do you find yourself echoing Nicodemus and asking “How can this be?” Here's the big reveal.

The only way to solve the puzzle is to go outside the box. You were never told not to. It's just what we do – it's called self-limiting behavior. Going outside the box isn't easy – admittedly for people like me, and surely people like Nicodemus, and perhaps people like you. People like Presbyterians who do things decently and in order. It goes against the way we were taught to color – stay in the lines. It goes against the way we are taught to live – don't get out of line. As people who have learned rules and try to follow expectations and who fare well by tradition, it doesn't occur to us that there might be another way. A way that is outside the box.

“Unless you are born again, anew, from above, you cannot see the kingdom of God.” It is the call, the challenge to a whole new life in faith. A new way of living and looking at life. It is not a matter of plugging Jesus into what we already know or think. It is to be open to a new way of thinking, of seeing God's kingdom and our part in it. It is not making the Christian faith work in our lives. It is imagining how the call of faith might reshape and change our lives. It is

not making faith make sense within our framework of life as we know it – our box. Rather it is accepting the truth of Jesus’ words “the wind/spirit 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.” Which is to say that the spiritual life is elusive and mysterious, ever moving, changing, shaping, reshaping – never stagnant, never done. It is entirely of God’s leading and doing, and may just call us to go outside the box of our expectations, our understandings, our tradition. The new life is one that is always open to the possibility of hearing, of seeing of discovering something new of God.

Abram was called to that new life, and was called to go outside the box of everything he’d known before – leaving home, the security of the familiar, to go to a place he didn’t now based on a promise of God that others didn’t know. After 75 years of living, it is fair to believe that the lines of Abram’s life were etched deeply, the box firmly in place. But the Spirit blows where it will, and it blew Abram outside the box and on a new way of faithfulness.

And Nicodemus? We don’t know. Best guess is that the encounter left him puzzled, unsure of how to connect all the dots of what Jesus had told him. Not the kind of neat, happy ending we like here inside the box. But it wasn’t the end – it was the beginning. We hear twice more about Nicodemus in John’s gospel. The next time, we hear him standing up publically to his Pharisee brothers in defense of Jesus, taking a risk, challenging the box of tradition. And then, in chapter 19, we find Nicodemus with Joseph of Arimathea, taking the dead body of Jesus down from the cross, and preparing it for burial using the mixture of spices, which Nicodemus had provided. A tender act of compassion performed outside the box of his Pharisee role, his tradition, the faith he thought he’d understood.

From his nighttime encounter with Jesus, it may have seemed that Nicodemus was still in the dark. But maybe that's the way things seem when we are challenged with spiritual enlightenment, when we're called to think or go outside our box. It is reassuring to hear that he took the words of Jesus to heart, and that he was beginning to live them out in new, unexpected, and even unappreciated ways. Maybe being born again isn't a decision in a moment, flipping a switch from off to on. Maybe, like birth itself, it takes some time, some gestation. Like Abram, Nicodemus was starting a new journey, to a new way of life to which God was leading him. And he could go, because he'd opened the door of the box of his life, looked beyond his own understandings and listened.

In reflecting on these scripture stories – the willingness of Abram and the openness of Nicodemus, editor of the Presbyterian Outlook Jill Duffield says this: *I wonder if we need to take on the posture of Nicodemus this Lenten season. I wonder if we, like Abram, need to go from what we know in order to see the new thing that God will show. I wonder if we shouldn't go looking for those who might not pat us on the back and tell us we're great, but instead will point out to us where we have missed the mark and failed to see the evidence of the Holy Spirit's working. Few things are more frightening. Few things are more faithful. But if this leader of the Jews, this learned Pharisee, can do it, maybe we can, too.*

To which, I would add – there are always new words and ways of God to lean in and listen for, and new questions to ask, new directions to undertake, new chapters of our story to write, and new understandings to be found. Dare to step outside the box and faithfully imagine. If you can see that 2 + 2 = fish – you are on your way!