

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Second Sunday of Lent
March 12, 2017
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

Laurie comes to us by night. It was not under the cloak of darkness as we might imagine Nicodemus, having carefully picked his way among the crop of rocks, oftentimes propped against his walking stick when his labored breathing catches up with him as he climbs the steep hill, being drawn by the light of the fire, with the smell of freshly cooked tilapia still lingering in the air, to find Jesus and his disciples, to ask his burning question. But rather she arrives under a cloak of anonymity, arriving at our Christmas Day dinner shortly before we closed the doors. There were only 20 minutes left before the last meal was served and a choice of only three pies remained, as she and her family slid into their seats at an empty table.

I pay attention to those who come last, for often some of my most important conversations are with people who come "at night," people who are afraid or feel unworthy to come to me or to our church in the light of day. It is often from the darkness of night, don't you think, that we bring our deepest questions, or search for some purpose to our lives, other than our mundane existence or routines.

Laurie has brought her three sons with her. Two abruptly leave after their meals arrive, as their capacity to be among crowds is quickly compromised and their anxiety skyrockets, and they don't yet know that we would have gladly accommodated them with a place setting in the nearby, but more private, library.

Like Nicodemus and Jesus, Laurie and I sit together and introduce ourselves. Her awkwardness precedes her, but she covers it quickly with a compliment, "This is such a nice thing for your church to do. It gives us a place to go today." Her statement is not unlike Nicodemus' initial compliment of Jesus, acknowledging the reality before him and claiming its origins from God.

Laurie and I are pulled into conversation. We share and laugh a bit together, then she gets to her burning question: Would I fit in here? The many helping hands, warm smiles, and easy conversations she has found around the table douse her with a pervasive sense of caring. She feels my compassion when she shares she had no money to buy Christmas presents for her children and she covers my embarrassment of having even asked the question with a warm smile etched out from her lowered head and sideways glance. She values the conversation with Susan, our Tweens teacher at the time, who shows delight in her son who could come to her Sunday school class. And yet she, like

Nicodemus, cannot completely comprehend what fitting into this “something new” might mean and instinctively and regrettably clings to the rationality, to the knowledge she knows in her heart, that it won’t work. “How could this be?” she asks herself. Laurie, like Nicodemus, is stuck in the reality she knows and cannot push beyond it, instead focusing her energy on building up all sorts of rational obstacles to embracing this new life.

“This is all I have to wear to church, this tee shirt and jeans?”

No problem, come as you are.

“I won’t be able to put anything in the offering plate.”

No problem. Show up. That’s your offering.

“I don’t know how you worship.

No problem, someone will show you and we have it all written out in our bulletin.

Her biggest and unspoken question though is: “Can I change enough to fit into this thing that is new and somehow oddly real?”

My sense is that Nicodemus worries, as perhaps we all do at times, whether we can embrace the change needed to be the new creation we see out of the corner of our eyes. It’s hard work to change; it is easier to stay where we are, and we seem to naturally gravitate to the things we can see directly in front of us, those things we allow to define us, rather than imagining a new spiritual reality which may collide with our physical reality.

How can this be? Nicodemus could not comprehend this transformation and leaves the scene confused. Laurie, I believe, experienced the transformation, but could not comprehend the changes she thought she had to make to settle her heart here with us on a Sunday morning.

The error in judgment they both made was that they imagined the transformation as something *they* had to do. But their experiences of “being born from above” are of the Spirit, and with God’s initiative. The reality is, just as our physical birth is through no initiative of our own, neither is our spiritual birth. We are delivered into this new reality that Jesus offers, and which we extended to Laurie at the Christmas dinner, through the movement of the Spirit. We need only to give our lives over to something beyond our own existence and to allow the Spirit to move us, to take us somewhere God has in mind, which, of course, is not what we have in mind! Like the gust of wind blasting the towering trees in the woods on a cold, wintry afternoon, the Spirit comes to us unbidden, unpredictable and unrelenting, and we bend and follow.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, who sits at the head table, wears fancy robes, and enjoys privilege. Laurie, sneaks into the chair at table in the corner at the church-sponsored community meal, where she hopes to go unnoticed, dressed only in her worn tee-sheet and jeans. What they each would have given up to be born from above would have been different, but what they both would have found would have been the same: a brand-new birth status where all people are honored equally, where all are counted as children of God. Jesus was offering them, and offers us, a brand-new sense of honor and status, given to us at our rebirth, belonging to the realm above, God's realm, so we can bring our spiritual reality here into our physical world.

I think that neither Laurie nor Nicodemus could see acquiring this new birth status, as a beloved child of God, as a plausible thing for them to do. Somehow, they needed to sit in their incomprehension for a while. But because John's gospel has a role for those who don't understand the Spirit right away, or need time to allow the spiritual growth to form within their hearts, or who don't show their faith exuberantly, but are there when it counts, we know there's a place in God's kingdom, now for people like you and me.

There was a gift of the Spirit given both to Nicodemus and Laurie, and that was the installation of hope within their hearts. I saw Laurie's eyes light up, her heart swell with joy, and her body and spirit filled abundantly for just that tiny bit of time that Christmas dinner two years ago. And Nicodemus rejoins us later in the story, which tells us he was touched that day with something that took some time to settle into and to change his heart.

Each week I wait each week for Laurie to walk through our front red door, for like Nicodemus, she hasn't come back right away. It isn't until nearly the end of the story that Nicodemus reappears, this time to defend Jesus, this time to anoint his body with spices.

My prayer is that someday Laurie will too defend Jesus, like Nicodemus did, in a way that makes sense for her. Maybe she'll defend Jesus by trusting the promise a good home-cooked meal provides, by leaning into the hope she felt in that moment of conversation, by becoming a part of our church, or maybe not. She may never return to our church but she'll tell others about a church of nice people who fed her family Christmas dinner and made them feel welcome. Maybe she'll defend Jesus in her finding it slightly easier to get out of bed on a few mornings. Or maybe she'll be like Nicodemus, who brought spices to Jesus' burial: she too will find a way to witness to a hope that is beyond what she can understand in the moment and allow herself to imagine a different life, a new creation.

We are all Nicodemus. We are all Laurie sometimes. There are times when we need to sit with the ludicrous invitation Jesus offers, to allow our hearts to process it for a while, and to gather strength for the transformation it will deliver.

Sometimes we think we need to go backwards in order to find the path forward, “entering a second time into the mother’s womb” as Nicodemus pondered. We think we want to go back and change some event or part of our life, erase some mistake, heal some hurt, take back some insult carelessly hurled at another, to be forgiven of some terrible behavior. Sometimes it works like that. We need to be washed clean to begin anew.

Sometimes, however, the Spirit works in the present by inviting us and shedding from our lives the expectations which become obstacles that keep us from moving forward: “I don’t have the right clothes to come to church. I don’t know how you worship. I may feel awkward. I don’t have the money you expect me to give.” Or, more like Nicodemus, “it doesn’t make sense. I can’t imagine it. I can only see things from a logical point of view and it’s not adding up, so it can’t be true.”

One grounding point of truth in my conversation with Laurie and in Jesus’ with Nicodemus, is that there is always an element of hope that is somehow planted within us when dealing with the Spirit. It is not just being born anew that is important, for that would mean the change would be all up to us. It would mean that it would be entirely up to Laurie to walk that ½ block from Fort Street to the corner of Prince and Burd Streets. But it is being born anew means from above. The from above part is important, for that’s where the Spirit comes in. None of this is possible without the Spirit. But we can call upon the Spirit, count upon the Spirit, and be attentive to her movement in our lives, as unbidden, unpredictable, and unrelenting as it might be.

During this season of Lent, God call us to return to what is basic, elemental, and necessary in our lives. The season begins with ashes and invites us into a time of casting away all that distracts us from recognizing the God who dwells at our core. It is a stark season, and yet, one which beckons us to create, take what we find in the shadows of our lives, and craft what we have never seen before. May each new breath we take be the breath taken with the Spirit who will deliver into something brand-new.