

Message: "Rebirthing Our Perspective"

Scripture Lesson: John 3:1-17

3Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." 3Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8The 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." 9Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

I was listening to the radio on Friday when a news story caught my attention. It was an interview with an environmental protection agency representative who was overseeing the efforts to determine toxicity levels surrounding the train derailment and subsequent release of chemicals in East Palestine, Ohio. Air and water sampling, multiple levels of testing, and a host of protocols were being used to determine if it was safe to breathe the air and drink the water after tens of thousands of gallons of toxic chemicals spilled: the chemicals included chloroethene (vinyl chloride), butyl acrylate, 2-ethylhexyl acrylate, ethylene glycol, monobutyl ether, and isobutylene - I will give anyone here a free cookie if you can spell any one of these compounds correctly! Even the pronunciation of those chemicals feels toxic, doesn't it?

What caught my attention was a statement from the EPA official regarding the continuance of the testing and the status of the results so far. The official said (and I tried to quote him as best as I could), "Well, we have known knowns, in terms of knowing how much of which chemicals were spilled and the levels of toxicity of those substances that are acceptable. We also have known unknowns, regarding knowing what chemicals have been released but not knowing what their combinations in different quantities will produce; the resulting toxicity is an

unknown. And then we have unknown unknowns, where we don't know what we don't know - in other words, things that will surprise us beyond our ability to predict or possibly even understand."

I found it not the most comforting of assessments, frankly. I can only imagine what the residents of East Palestine are thinking after hearing those results - again, probably not very reassuring.

But I thought of how such a thought process fits in with much of life as it unfolds before us - that it is filled with known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns. So often we begin with the things we have experienced ourselves, the things we know and trust and understand pretty well - these are the known knowns -- $2+2 = 4$, the sun rises in the east, Oreos are hands down the best cookie to dunk in milk - these kinds of things. But we also recognize a whole lot of things that we wonder about, that we realize we don't know but would like to know or even feel we need to know - the known unknowns. Is there sentient life elsewhere in the universe? What is really going on behind the screen of our computers? How can we effectively address climate change together as a planet? And how on earth did a platypus come into being? (what was God thinking?). We know what we want or need to know, even as it remains unknown.

And yet, there is a further area which we don't like at all, being sentient creatures who depend upon learning and knowledge and comprehension to make headway in this life - but we all sense the mysterious nature of the world, we have all been profoundly surprised at things we didn't even know were possible yet came to pass; we have all been disturbed by things that popped out from existence and remain objects of ambiguity - these are the unknown unknowns, or the things we didn't know that we didn't know. There's a lot of them, things that surprised us and caught us off guard - Covid, the vast political irrationalities of late, personalities that boggle the mind, the power of mass media to inform and confuse, extreme human behavior, the popularity of Cabbage Patch Kids, a weird tik-tok video going viral on the internet.....there's a lot of things that happen that no one predicted, both good and bad; we didn't know that we didn't know about them. And so very often, experiencing the things we didn't know that we didn't know, changes what we know.

If you are still with me, there is a point directly relevant to our scripture lesson today. This train of thought (no pun intended) - known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns -- is a powerful way to understand the predicament of Nicodemus as he engages Jesus in a nocturnal liaison filled with

mystique. Nicodemus is a learned pharisee, one who has studied and practiced and experienced the substance of the Jewish faith most likely for all his life. He knew his religion. Now it is common to label all pharisees as hypocrites and power mongers for their typical habit of overlording others with the dictates of Levitical law; today, however, we see an important reminder of the diversity among their ranks; Nicodemus is no power monger, but an honest seeker of the truth, and recognizes in Jesus something profound and worth exploring.

So he arranges to meet with Jesus, perhaps surreptitiously but possibly to make sure they are not interrupted and have an undistracted moment together which the night would make possible - and all points to his authentic desire to explore his faith. And we can see the train of thought or perspective unfold: Nicodemus starts from his known knowns, his assumptive understanding of his faith, expressing his conviction that Jesus is embodying evidence of divine infusion: "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."

If, however, Nicodemus expected a pleasant acknowledgement to his intended compliment, he was soon to be unpleasantly surprised. Jesus responds with a theological curve ball -- "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Jesus blows Nicodemus's known knowns right out of the water; and the game is afoot: Jesus continues -- "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The 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." And it is clear from Nicodemus's response - "HOW CAN THESE THINGS BE?" -- that he recognizes he is now in the uncharted territory of the unknown unknowns.

I, myself, and many, many others have preached various sermons on this passage, all with different emphases - what does it mean to be born again, to be born from above; why use the serpent Moses lifted up as an example of divine affirmation; what does it mean to believe because of the unpredictable, uncontrollable movement of the Spirit likened to the wind; is belief a precedent requirement to salvation when it is clearly stated that God desires that all should be saved, regardless of faith status.....??????

The bottom-line answer to all of these questions is a very precarious "I'm not absolutely sure." But rather than be a detriment to my faith, I find it very reassuring that my standing in the world as a child of God does not depend upon the extent of my knowledge of Godly things but the willingness I have nurtured to trust in the God I don't understand completely - and that, as I trust that which is beyond my means to comprehend, that which I don't comprehend comes into my life to share with me things I never would experience otherwise.

Many times, uncertainty before God is the most honest faith response we can have. Uncertainty for a person of faith is essential for that faith to be grounded in God, whose very definition is embedded in revealed mystery. Uncertainty is essential to faith for it provides an essential opportunity to adjust one's perspective as one strives to understand; without it, our certainty easily becomes our new god - and a false one at that.

I find it incredibly sad that so many Christians have no questions about their faith, no doubts about God, no uncertainties about Jesus. I find it sad in that I fear their desire for clarity obscures the mystery of God. It is easy to settle for rigid statements, clear doctrines, and eloquent creeds to outline our faith - but in so doing, we automatically fall into the trap of making God conform to our understanding. And this is always backwards, and always wrong.

Better to make space for the unknown unknowns, says Jesus. Nicodemus agrees, not verbally perhaps but by remaining engaged with the questions of his heart and his hunger for deeper truth. This is such a good model for us all as people who honestly seek the truth God provides; the questions are essential to our progress. They provide for the constant re-birthing of our perspective toward the revealed mystery that Jesus came to share.

I would like to leave you with the short commentary on this passage by Richard Lischer, who is professor emeritus at Duke Divinity School. I found his summation eloquent and accurate:

"Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus preserves a space for mystery, a sacred vestibule to experience, choice, and language. The two rabbis speak under cloak of darkness, and Jesus says that whatever happens to Nicodemus will resemble the winds of chance on a warm Judean night. Just as an invisible *something* parts our hair and kisses our face, the Spirit stirs in us before we have words to name the stirring."