

Born from Above...
Philippians 2: 5-7a; John 3:1-21
March 20, 2011

¹*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.* ²*He came to Jesus by night...*”(Jn. 3) What an image this conjures up for us! Nicodemus was a man of great power and he was a spiritual leader among the Jewish people. He was a teacher and a man of great influence. Yet, our gospel reading begins today by telling us that he came under the cover of darkness to greet Jesus. What are the images that come to mind when we think **of business transactions or meetings that take place under cover of darkness?** If you are a fan of any of the numerous CSI or Law and Order television programs or even the news magazines, you know that rarely does **anything good happen in the cloak of darkness.** Thus the scene is set for us.

Nicodemus greets Jesus in something of a “dubious” fashion. He says to Jesus, ²*“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.**”*(Jn.3) **Jesus is not** impressed with Nicodemus’ platitudes and false praise. He answers with, *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”* (Jn. 3:3) **This only serves to confuse Nicodemus** who tries to protect his pride by asking, *“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”*”(Jn. 3:4) Actually, Nicodemus’ questions really seem to be fair ones in light of Jesus’ response, don’t they? Again, Jesus has a reply, *“⁵Very 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.”*”(Jn. 3) **It is interesting** to take note here that Jesus uses the

singular “you” up to verse 7, when speaking to Nicodemus. But then he suddenly shifts to the plural “you” at verse 7, akin to the southern “y’all.”

At any rate, it is as though today’s conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is a circular one. “Jesus speaks on a spiritual level, but his audience understands him **on a physical/earthly level.**” (M. Cosby) “**Nicodemus asks spiritual questions**, but translates in earthly images. Jesus speaks in earthly images, but communicates spiritual answers. The two pass like ships in the night.” (J. Walton)

It is in the dark of night that Nicodemus questions Jesus and it is often in the dark of night when many of us **wrestle with our questions and doubts, and it is** also the time when we tend to face our deepest needs. As we search ourselves, wrestling with the difficult **questions, processing and prioritizing our** needs, oftentimes we find ourselves transformed. “Dying and rising’ and ‘to be born anew’ are the same ‘root image’ for the process of personal transformation at the center of Christian life: to be born [anew] involves death and resurrection. It means dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being... a way of being and an **identity centered in the sacred, in Spirit, in Christ**, in God.” (M. Borg) When we are born anew, our way of being, our faith is placed in God from the core of who we are.

Marcus Borg writes in *The God We Never Knew* that “faith that ‘believes in God’ is not something we can simply will, on our own: we are led into it. It grows [when we nurture it]... It is not a requirement that we are to meet but a quality that grows as our relationship with God deepens. But we do have to take the first step and then another (though **sometimes we are virtually pushed into this by desperation or** lured into it by example or experience).” There is an old adage that sometimes God uses a pebble to get a person’s attention. If that doesn’t work, sometimes a larger rock. And for those who refuse to pay attention, God resorts to a brick.

The devastation and destruction from the recent earthquake in Japan, and our entering into yet another war, **certainly feel like bricks too many of us, doesn’t it?** Again, I am not saying that what has happened in Japan is from some wrathful God, I do not believe that. But from a flesh, or an earthly perspective, we feel the heaviness

of their grief and their loss. It at times feels as though a brick has been placed around our necks as we process **the devastation en mass. We are still reeling from the** earthquake in Haiti, the earthquake in New Zealand, and now Japan. The world continues to watch the survivors of the earthquake in Japan because it of course is the most recent and because of its magnitude. In my clergy cloister this past week and in an online article folks discussed the sense of community and sense of family that the **people of Japan have shown us. The questions that I have** heard asked are: “Why have the people in Japan not started to riot and loot like we would in America? Why are the people of Japan not angry? How are these people holding onto their hope and faith in the midst of such loss and **devastation?” Many of you have perhaps even** seen the video news coverage of the Spaniel protecting another dog that is obviously injured and ill. It is enough to bring tears to your eyes at the image of such love, **compassion, and loyalty** in the midst of the dogs own fears. The people and the animals of Japan have experienced a major life crisis that we cannot begin to imagine and yet they are able to reach out neighbor to **neighbor and survive this experience** by loving one another and in faith. An Associated Press article reads:

No water for the toilets? No problem. Students in Karakuwa bring buckets of water from the school swimming pool to give survivors the dignity of a proper flush. In the kitchen, a giant rice cooker given to the school by a resident sits on a table, steam rising from the heaping mounds of rice inside.

The women mix together squid, shrimp and stir-fried vegetables in large pots, turning it into a nourishing stew that they ladle onto bowls of rice. They're delivered with slices of apples throughout the building.

In the middle of one classroom, a group of boys plunk themselves in seats around a table, the bowls of stew sending plumes of steam into the air. In unison, they bow their heads.

"Thank you," they say. "For everything." (By KRISTEN GELINEAU and FOSTER KLUG, Associated Press Kristen Gelineau And Foster Klug, Associated Press – Fri Mar 18, 11:13 am ET)

It is in a **state of crisis, amidst the rubble, and the unknown** of whether or not some of their family members survived this catastrophe that the people of Japan

have been born anew. We, too, can share in their rebirth in that we are challenged to ask of ourselves “**What would I do if something like this happened to me? How would my faith help me through such a crisis? Could I hold onto hope in the midst of such loss and destruction? What is it that God is asking us to do now?**”

Faith is a verb, it requires action on our part. It requires prayer, it requires being intentional in cultivating our relationship with God, while seeking the will of God for our lives, not just under the cover of darkness but in the light of day as well. Faith challenges us to risk knowing and being known by the Divine. It requires facing our deepest doubts and **questions**. “**Who among us doesn’t question God in the darkest night of fear and doubt, and hope for answers and reassurance? Most of all, who among us hasn’t yearned to know that ‘all of this’ – our lives, our world, with both our struggles and our hopes – springs from love?**”(K. Huey) Deep down most of us want God to change our lives, we want the Spirit to move, we want the wind to blow us in the right direction and we want to be born anew, but we are afraid. Afraid **that if we open ourselves up to the possibilities** then too much would be asked of us, our lives might be too different. It is in the letting go and trusting that “Jesus did not come in the world to condemn us, but in order that we might be saved through him,” that we can begin to find the strength to walk in the presence of the Spirit and not of the flesh, to walk in the light. We have within us a Spirit of restlessness to encourage us to move on, **to grow, to seek to be in the presence of our Creator**.

¹⁶ *‘For God so loved the world that [God] gave [the beloved] Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.(Jn.3)* “To know God’s love **means letting go and making room and being ready to be born anew, only this time with God at the center.**” (S. Lloyd) It is to walk in faith. Faith is not a requirement that we are to meet but a quality that grows as our relationship with God deepens. **But we do have to take the first step and then another.** To know God’s love is to die to our flesh and be resurrected in **Spirit, it is to walk in the light leaving** the darkness of fear and doubt behind us. You must be born anew, you must be born from above. Amen.