

Second Sunday in Lent
Year A, RCL
March 4, 2020 + March 8, 2020
North Fork Ministries
Advent Lutheran – Ecumenical Service
John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus 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?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

"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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"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.

"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."

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I don't often refer to the original Greek text in a sermon. It seems a little too ostentatious for a country boy from Texas. And I grew up hearing way too many sermons where the preacher was intent on impressing the congregation with the extent of his biblical scholarship, but today I find it too compelling to avoid. In John's gospel we heard Jesus say, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above". The Greek word for "from above" can also be translated as "anew" – as in "no one can see the

kingdom of God without being born anew”.

Two other words, in today’s gospel, are used interchangeably in Greek, “spirit” and “wind”. “The wind blows where it chooses...you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” So it is with the Spirit as well.

This is real “born again” language. I grew up in a part of the country where talk of being “born again” or “being saved” is commonplace. For many, the question of being saved is a way of dividing the world into separate camps - including some and excluding others from God’s love. However, whenever someone would ask the priest in my home church in Austin, “Have you been saved?” His reply, Texas drawl intact, was always the same, “Yeah, on a Friday afternoon, bout 2000 years ago in a town near Jerusalem.”

So what does it mean for a community like ours to be born anew? It may mean retaining an openness to the continued movement of God’s spirit in our midst in new and unexpected ways. To always guard against the tendency to say as a church – “This is the way we’ve always done it.”

One of the best things about my job has always been that I get to say yes. There is nothing I like better than when a member of one of my churches comes to me and says I would like to do this, I'd like to do that, what do you think? And I get to say yes...let's do it. I love to not get in the way of the Spirit moving among our people.

I also get to say yes to myself. As a church planter in my previous job, I would frequently get ideas about how we might go about sharing a gospel of love and inclusion in Northwest Arkansas. Some ideas seemed outright brilliant, at the moment of conception, and turned out to be flat stupid. And some ideas that seemed harebrained at first, managed to bear fruit.

I started a worship service in Spanish and I was becoming discouraged about the low attendance. I was passing out fliers at una tienda (a small grocery store), advertising the English as a Second Language classes we were holding and thinking about where I might find a large concentration of non-English speakers. And it came to me – at the change of shift at one of the county's largest poultry processing plants.

Deciding to act on the idea immediately, before I lost my resolve, I gathered the fliers and made my way to Ozark Mountain Poultry. I passed out a few fliers in the parking lot as I made my way toward a very large white, boxy building. I thought I was at the main entrance, but after a Spanish-speaking woman used her plastic entry card to unlock the door for me, I realized that I had unintentionally made my way into the building through the employee's entrance.

“Donde esta la oficina?,” I asked her. Her directions to the office were long and complicated, but I followed them as best I could. I made my way down twisting corridors, through employee changing rooms, and eventually found myself inside a very large dining hall. The windowless walls and the floor and the plastic tables were as white as Jesus' garments we read about on Transfiguration Sunday – dazzling. And neatly arrayed atop row after row of dining hall tables was an endless procession of lunch boxes – of every color you can imagine, each containing the tacos y tortas that would sustain their owner through the long shift at the plant.

Again, I asked, “Donde esta la oficina? And again I was directed through *una puerta*, a door, and down a corridor. At the end of a cold cavernous hallway I could see a wide portal. The view past the portal was obscured by a curtain of translucent plastic ribbons hanging from the header above. Suddenly, as I stood at the doorway, a breeze that blew from, “I know not where,” parted the curtain and I crossed the threshold into the heart of the processing plant.

Unlike the lunchroom where the stark whiteness was punctuated by the vivid color of the waiting lunchboxes – here the whiteness was complete. Florescent lights looming high above the factory floor bleached the room of all shadow. Five hundred human figures, arrayed in white from head to toe, standing at row after row of conveyor belts laden with the carcasses of dead birds, suddenly, for a moment, ceased their labor, and a thousand eyes, dark and penetrating, fell on me.

I smiled and nodded... the thousand eyes smiled back... and I was born anew.

We sometimes come to church seeking renewal. And it often happens. We are uplifted by the music, the oft-repeated prayers touch us in a life-giving way, and you might hear something in a homily worth talking about over lunch. I submit to you that the movement of the Spirit can flow in the opposite direction as well. When we consciously move through the world, when we go about our daily lives with an awareness of the example of Jesus, healing the sick, caring for the poor, reaching out to those at the margins of society, we are just as likely to encounter movement of spirit as we are inside hallowed walls like these. We are born again when we are in the midst of God's work. And our worship, worship that always runs the risk of becoming rarefied, sterile - when it is only focused inward - will be fed, nurtured, and constantly renewed.

Nicodemus asked, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" The opportunity to be born again, to find renewal in the spirit, abounds. We only need emerge from the darkness. Nicodemus' conception of rebirth was narrow. "How can I enter into my mother's womb again?" he asked.

Jesus tells him that rebirth takes many forms and can come from any direction. The Spirit moves like the wind. The wind blows where she chooses. And if we, as a people, are to be continually renewed, we must, like a sailboat on Peconic Bay, allow the breeze to move us.

Nicodemus, the Pharisee, came to Jesus with a particular understanding of what it meant to uphold God's law. It is easy for a church, for each of us that make up the body of Christ, to put together a rigid framework of ideas about what it means to be a follower of Jesus and what it means to worship God. It is easy to get caught up in what constitutes proper worship, whether music should be traditional or contemporary, whether our style is high church or low church, or if we are formal or informal, liturgical or more free-flowing. My prayer for us, is that we are always alert to the movement of Spirit, and that all of our churches on the North Fork will be known now and in a hundred years, as places where anyone can be born again, and again, and again.