

Answers in the Night

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Sunday, February 23, 2020

Text: John 3:1-8

Has anyone here ever found themselves wide awake in the middle of night and your mind just won't stop racing? (*pause for show of hands*) I think it's a pretty common experience. It must be! Look at all the ways our free market economy is trying to make money from all those people wide awake in the middle of the night. Over the counter sleep medications. Prescription sleep medications. Self help articles by the thousands on the best way to get a good night's sleep. Buy a new mattress! Buy an electric blanket! Buy a weighted blanket! Buy a pillow that keeps your head cool! Buy a pillow that keeps your head warm! And so on, and so on, and so on. I don't know about you, but I have never found being wide awake in the middle of the night to be a problem I can buy my way out of. It is a situation to be endured.

I am someone who has had found myself wide awake in the middle of the night on more than a few occasions during my life. Stress is the usual culprit in my case. And that stress usually takes the form of question after question tumbling through my brain like race horses careening around the track. Those questions can be about anything and everything. Usually they are about mundane things – like getting the taxes filed or figuring out how to find the money for some home improvement project we want to

undertake. I also tend to lose sleep when a big trip is in the offing – Will the B&B’s I picked look as nice in reality as they do online – that kind of thing. And of course, I worry about things here too, as I know many of you do too. What if it snows on Bazaar or Valentine Tea day? What if the kitchen inspection goes south? What if no one shows up for the Attic Treasures Yard Sale and we’re stuck with even more stuff than we started out with? Sound familiar to anyone?

Of course it does. That’s why this story about Nicodemus coming to Jesus “by night” as the text says is so intriguing. I always wonder just what “by night” actually means. Did he stop by just after dark on his way home from the Temple? Or did he come by a little after dinner but well before bedtime – deciding on the spur of the moment to take a walk and then just finding himself at the door of the house where Jesus was staying? Or, did he suddenly find himself wide awake in the middle of the night, tossing and turning as he reconsidered all that Jesus had been teaching the people. Had this been happening so many nights in a row that finally he couldn’t stand it any longer and decided to go and talk it out with Jesus right then and there? If he woke him up, so what! This was driving him crazy!

The truth is, we don’t know just what “by night” meant. It could have described any of those scenarios I just mentioned. Or, as tradition holds, it could mean that Nicodemus came to Jesus by

night so that the other Temple officials wouldn't know he had visited the young teacher that so many of the Sanhedrin – the Jewish ruling council of which Nicodemus was a member – viewed with deep distrust and suspicion. It is this last scenario which is most commonly how this text is interpreted – that Nicodemus came at night because he wanted to come in secret, protecting himself from the prying eyes and ears of other Jews in the community. But the text doesn't say that. The text only says that Nicodemus came “by night.” That Jesus had awoken deep questions within Nicodemus is beyond dispute. Why he chose the moment he did to come and talk with Jesus about this we just don't know. And that's the point where we can connect with Nicodemus – and his questions.

Nicodemus opens the conversation by telling Jesus that he knows Jesus is “a teacher who has come from God.” He tells Jesus he knows this is the case because, “no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” And what exactly are the “signs” Nicodemus is referring to we need to ask. This encounter between the two happens early on in the Gospel – the third chapter. So, what has Jesus done so far that has brought Nicodemus to see him “by night?” Not that much, actually. He was baptized by John who repeatedly refers to him as “the lamb of God.” He has recruited a few disciples, Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathaniel to be specific. He's performed the miracle of

turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, after lecturing his mother who asked him to help the family on why it was not yet his time. And he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple, boasting as he did that if they tore down the Temple itself he could rebuild it in three days. We should note here that this last story in particular feels to us like it's out of order happening at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in John. That's because John has a very different timeline from the other three gospels. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus only goes to Jerusalem and the Temple once, ending in a series of confrontations with authorities that led up to the crucifixion. In John, Jesus makes several trips in and out of Jerusalem so that stories we usually associate with Holy Week appear in John at various times throughout Jesus ministry. Just one of the things that makes John's Gospel different and intriguing.

But, back to the signs he had done so far that had brought Nicodemus to him in the night. The Temple incident alone probably raised a lot of questions in the mind of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leadership council. It is to Nicodemus' credit that rather than just getting angry with Jesus, these "signs" as he calls them, just made him curious. He wanted to understand Jesus better – who he was and why he was doing what he was doing. I'm sure he came to Jesus hoping for a very thoughtful conversation with a special rabbi. Instead he got an answer which

he just could not understand. “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Nicodemus jumped on the “being born” part of that answer and was incredulous. How can a person be born again, he asks?

Surely one cannot as an adult go back into the mother’s womb to be born again. Jesus explains it once more: “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.”

The water part Nicodemus apparently understood because it was common Jewish practice at the time to engage in ritual bathing to be cleansed from sin as one attempted to reset one’s relationship with God. But the whole born of the Spirit thing he clearly wasn’t getting. Jesus uses the example of the wind to try to help Nicodemus understand what he meant. “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.” Huh?

Nicodemus still didn’t get it, and frankly most of us probably don’t either. So, what did Jesus mean here? He meant that the Spirit of God isn’t something we can see. It is only something we can feel, we can sense, as it enters our hearts when we open ourselves up to God. The Spirit of God is an invisible force of divine presence that can transform our minds, our hearts and our lives but first we must be open to receiving it. We must trust that such transformation is possible, no matter what our stage or state

in life might be. We must believe we can become people transformed as a result of the action of God's Spirit in our lives. When we are able to do this is when we are born again.

We need to pause here a moment and acknowledge that different evangelical Christian traditions understand the whole "born again" concept in very different ways. Our understanding in the United Church of Christ is the one I have just explained – we are born again when we allow ourselves to be transformed by the action of the Holy Spirit – God's Spirit – in our lives. Since the transformation of one's life is an ongoing thing, we believe that a person on the journey of life and faith as a follower of Jesus is being continually born again. Every time we recognize and confess a shortcoming – a sin – and ask Jesus to help us be better, to do better – we are being born again. By contrast, conservative evangelicals believe that being born again is a one-time experience. One is born again at the moment one accepts Jesus into your life as your personal savior as outlined specifically in John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Several points are key to understanding these differing beliefs about what it means to be born again. For conservative evangelicals, being born again is a one and done but it is a two step process. Accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior is step one. Being "convicted" meaning becoming fully aware and fully

accepting of how deeply sinful you truly are is step two. You need the second step if you are to continue to live a life worthy of Jesus being your Savior. This second step of “conviction” is sort of similar to our understanding of being continually born again in that one is expected to be continually reminding oneself of one’s need for God’s grace to free one from the life sentence of sin. However, this second step is easy to sidestep if one understands the born again experience itself as being all that is needed to be assured of eternal life.

Born again. Confusing to Nicodemus and confusing to us. That’s why the temptation is to just not think about it. After all, who wants to think about sin – about all the ways we fall short of God’s expectations of us? It is not pleasant. It is not a light-hearted endeavor. In fact, it is serious business that is downright humbling. Yet it is an absolute pre-requisite if we are going to be serious in our practice of the Christian faith. Enter Lent, the season of preparation for Easter that we will enter together this week on Ash Wednesday. Lent originated as a time of study for individuals who wanted to join the church. It still is seen as a time of study but primarily as a time of personal reflection on the state of our souls as people seeking to follow Jesus in the way we live our lives each day. The focus of Lent, therefore, is to deepen and/or refresh our understanding of who Jesus was and why his presence in the lives of Christians is central to whom we

understand ourselves to be. Nicodemus is our role model in this. He thought he understood what God expected of him as a person of faith. Then Jesus came along and shook everything up, changing the rules, the expectations and even the outcome of the lifelong journey of faith.

So, as you begin your journey through Lent, whatever that will be for you, I invite you to consider more deeply what it might mean for you to be born again – to be renewed and refreshed by welcoming God’s Spirit more intentionally into your life. What might it mean for you to pause to ponder intentionally how it is that you live each day as a follower of Jesus? The possibilities are endless! Our Lenten program this year will be outlined in the March *Beacon* and in a special brochure that will be out on Wednesday evening at the Ash Wednesday service. It includes a variety of faith practices you can explore as a means of making just a little more space in your life for God as you ponder who it is God has created you to be at this point in your life. Dear friends, Lent is a gift, a time to be like Nicodemus and give voice to our questions of faith and listen intently for Jesus to respond. We begin opening that gift together on Wednesday. I’ll be looking for you. Amen.