

## Second Sunday in Lent

Gen. 12:1-4a Ps. 121 Rom. 4:1-17 Jn. 3:1-17

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 3-1-26

Our theme for the Lenten season this year is “A spring in the desert”... a theme that invites us to acknowledge the dry, barren, desert times in our lives...those times when everything we think we know, everything we are accustomed to holding onto, seems to be falling apart before our very eyes... and there, in the absence of all of our usual supports, the invitation as well for us to search the landscape of our days and nights for a “spring of water” ... a spring of hope, even if that “spring” is just a trickle, a drip, maybe even only a scent carried on the wind...

This desert theme is often used in congregations to mark the forty days of Lent, in part because...

- the Gospel text for the first Sunday in Lent is always Jesus’ forty-day ordeal in the desert (or the wilderness), where he faces hunger, thirst, and solitude, not to mention Satan himself...
- And in part because our forty-day Lenten trek through the wilderness on our way to Easter somewhat mirrors the story of the People of Israel trekking through the desert for forty years on their way to the promised land (a portion of that story being referenced in our Gospel text for this morning as Jesus speaks of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness to save his wayward people...)

- And in part because there are those who have gone through desert times before us, and who have borne witness to a kind of “desert wisdom” that rings true not in our heads, but rather somewhere deeper, in our guts and our bones and our hearts, which is where the season of Lent longs to lead us... Like that word of wisdom in Michael Ondaatje’s novel “The English Patient” ... as he writes, *“A man in a desert can hold absence in his cupped hands knowing it is something that feeds him more than water”*...

Or like that word of wisdom found in a work entitled “The Cloud of Unknowing,” which was written in the latter part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century by an unknown Christian mystic, who wrote... *“God is a desert to be entered and loved, never an object to be grasped or understood.”*

While the desert theme isn’t blatantly present in our texts for this morning, I think it would be fair to say that Jesus is inviting Nicodemus into “the desert of un-knowing,” as Nicodemus comes to Jesus “knowing” a whole lot of stuff... **knowing** his identity as a leader of the Pharisees, for example; an identity that certainly carried with it some degree of privilege and prestige... **knowing** the law inside and out, as well as the multitudinous “dos” and “don’ts” deemed necessary for keeping the Law in the “correct” way... **knowing** the stories and texts in the Hebrew Scriptures that affirmed Nicodemus’ sense of belonging in the ancestral line that began with Father Abraham...

Notice that the first three words Nicodemus speaks to Jesus as he comes to him by night are, “Rabbi, we **know**... We **know** 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...”

Nicodemus thereby strategically beginning his nighttime exchange with Jesus from a position of knowing, hoping perhaps that Jesus might respond with an affirmation of sorts, and then continue the conversation with a little back-and-forth that fits quite nicely into Nicodemus’ framework of theological understanding...

That hope being dashed to pieces as Jesus responds instead with the strange and enigmatic statement, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above...”

A response Nicodemus quickly tries to squeeze back into the framework he knows, questioning how someone could return to their mother’s womb so they might be born again, only to have Jesus dash Nicodemus’ framework to pieces yet again in words about the wild windy spirit of God, moving wherever it wishes, up-ending all the **known** world until in the loss of what is known, a glimpse, a hint, a scent of something else begins to form in the un-known... Something of a deeper truer kind that gives new birth to all who are willing to be swept up in the Spirit’s wild wind-blown embrace...

Poor Nicodemus. Of all the Pharisees, he was the only one who seemed interested in hearing what Jesus had to say... Coming in the darkness of night, so, perhaps, no one else would see him... Poor Nicodemus... So eager he was to take what he already knew and, in Jesus’ presence, to add just a little bit more...

Only to have Jesus pull the rug right out from underneath him so Nicodemus might find himself in a place of total un-knowing... And there, in that place, might begin to sense the meaning of Michael

Ondaatje's wisdom saying, *"A man in a desert can hold absence in his cupped hands knowing it is something that feeds him more than water"...*

The thing is, our Gospel text for this morning doesn't only invite Nicodemus to enter the desert of un-knowing... It also invites us into such a place, not only as we ponder Jesus' impossible words to Nicodemus about the Spirit of God blowing where it will, and being born anew, but as we listen to what Jesus has to say in the rest of the text... which is equally impossible stuff alluding to...

- earthly things and heavenly things,
- and the "son of man" ascending and descending,
- and the saving power of the serpent lifted up on the pole in the wilderness, just as the Son of Man lifted up on the cross was/is saving...
- Not to mention what is probably the most quoted verse of the entire Bible, "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"...

A verse that is most often used as a bully stick by people who think they **know** what everyone else should **know** in order to "get to heaven," when really, this entire text from John is intended to catapult us into the unknown, where in the absence of all our well-preserved certainties and our normal supports, we begin to catch a glimpse, a hint, a scent of something else... Something of a deeper, truer, wider, wilder kind...

Something John the Gospel writer calls “eternal life,” (“Zoe” in Greek), which for John the Gospel writer does **not** mean a place called heaven to which the believers get to go after they die, but a **“fullness of life” lived in every here and every now, in the bone-deep, gut-felt trust of the love that is stronger than death... the love that rises in the midst of death + despite all evidence to the contrary... A fullness of life, born from love, free for the living into and out of for every desert traveler whose hands and hearts are empty enough to sense it, even the slightest scent of it...**

Which is why I don't think John the Gospel writer would mind at all if we added a verse to this morning's text... a verse very much in keeping with the many “I Ams” Jesus speaks in John's Gospel... Adding to the “I Am the water of life, he who drinks of me will never be thirsty”, “I Am the bread of life, he who eats of me will never be hungry”, “I Am the Good Shepherd of the Sheep, he who knows me hears my voice”... Adding this verse...

*I am the desert of life;  
The one who knows me comes  
By way of unknowing,  
And in that unknowing  
Comes to know the love  
That lives deep down  
And wide open +,  
The love that moves in the dark,  
In the desert...*

*And in that knowing,  
Comes to know "Zoe" -  
Eternal life lived  
in every here and every now,  
world without end,  
Amen.*

The truth is, for many of us, this time in which we are living feels like a desert... a wilderness... For many of us, our cupped hands are already empty, and the way ahead seems very uncertain... For some of us, this uncertainty comes as a result of serious health issues, for some it comes as a result of broken relationships, for some it comes as a result of the insanity, the arrogance, the greed, the lust for power that are wreaking havoc in our nation and our world...

If this is true for you this morning, as it is for me... if you, like me, are in a state of un-knowing... if your cupped hands and your heart, like mine, are empty... Then let us listen to Nicodemus, who you may remember, along with Joseph of Arimethea, prepared Jesus' body for burial after his death, indicating to me that Nicodemus, somewhere along the line had come to know the gift of unknowing Jesus had tried to teach him that night when Nicodemus had come with his hands and his life full to the brim...

Let us listen to Nicodemus... Because I think he would tell us to just "be" in that state of unknowing... to just sit in the desert of our

wilderness with our cupped hands open and empty... to acknowledge our uncertainty, our anxiety, our fear, our rage, our pain... and in the absence of any sign of water or hope whatsoever, to lift our heads for the scent of it...

Because, as Nicodemus would tell us, it is there...

- It is there in the presence of the friend who shows up at your door after a loved one has died...
- It is there in the sound of the first songbird in late February...
- It is there in the flower lady of Boucha who insists on planting flowers even as Russian bombs fall on her neighborhood...
- It is there in the words of Archbishop Hosam Naoum, who in the midst of war, ends his letter addressed to his Brothers and Sisters in Christ with these words, 'I extend an urgent invitation to all people of goodwill: intercede for us now. The hour is late. And the danger is great. We remain battered and bruised, but not defeated.'
- It is there in the last lines of Jane Kenyon's poem entitled 'Briefly It Enters, and Briefly Speaks,' as she writes from God's heart, saying 'I Am the one whose love overcomes you, already with you when you think to call my name'...
- It is there in the bread that is put into our empty hands, and in the words that accompany that gift... 'This is the body of Christ, the bread of heaven, given for you'... the presence of the love that moves in the dark and rises even in the midst of death...

I think Nicodemus would tell us to come to Jesus empty-handed and broken-hearted, because, as he would say through his tears of joy, "A

*man in a desert can hold absence in his cupped hands knowing it is something that feeds him more than water...*

“For in the absence of everything else, there is the possibility that we might sense the presence of love... Love that blows where it will, being born again and again and again in the hearts of those who dare to receive it, to take it in... living in the fullness of life that is “zoe,” even in the midst of the desert... “

This is what I think Nicodemus would say to us..

And so, dear friends, along with Nicodemus, we open our empty hands, and we offer our broken hearts... we lift our heads to catch the scent of water, the scent of hope, the presence of God’s wild windy Spirit, trusting that it is here... trusting that it will find a way to rise again and again, even in us, even in you and in me...

In the name and in the presence of the one who meets each of us in the darkness of our own days and nights + and teaches us how...  
Amen.