Second Sunday in Lent

Gen.12:1-4a Ps.121 Rom.4:1-5,13-17 Jn.3:1-17

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church March 8, 2020

My good friend Pam Shellberg, who's a New Testament scholar and seminary professor, once gave a seminary commencement address using the stories we heard read this morning about God's call to Abram to ***leave*** his country and kinsfolk for a place yet unknown **and** Jesus' call to Nicodemus to ***leave*** the religious certainties upon which he had built his life in exchange for a life lived in the unknown and windswept landscape called the Kingdom of God.

In her commencement address Pam suggested that the graduates were in a similar place of transition, as they would soon be ***leaving*** the school where they had spent the last few years, ***leaving*** the professors who had opened them up to new learning, ***leaving*** the friends with whom they had studied and commiserated and complained and celebrated, ***leaving*** classrooms whose walls and windows had become as familiar as an old pair of shoes…

In that commencement address Pam acknowledged that while such ***leaving*** for new places and possibilities can be exciting, it can also be very painful, as it requires the relinquishment of things **"known"** for things yet **"unknown"**… a relinquishment of certainties for a myriad of uncertainties…

There is perhaps no story in the Bible that speaks more profoundly to both the promise and the devastation of such leaving than does the story of Nicodemus… And in order for me to speak of how this is so, I will go by way of a similar kind of leaving to which I was called just this past week…

But first, a reminder that Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Which means his knowledge of the Law, his commitment to the Jewish traditions, and his obedience to and love of the Covenant that lived at the heart of Judaism was full and sure and true…

The writer of John's Gospel wrote his narrative with its story of Nicodemus in the last decade of the first century, shortly after the Temple had been destroyed by Rome. So as you might imagine, many Jews, having lost their most sacred and essential identity marker, wanted desperately to cling to whatever else of their faith they could possibly cling to… Some of those treasured things being held in forms and traditions and practices developed over centuries of faithful living… In a time of upheaval and uncertainty such clinging to the old forms and traditions is only natural.

But at the time John wrote his Gospel there were also some Jews who had come to see Judaism through the lens of Jesus' preaching and teaching in such a powerful and evocative way, they could no longer imagine how it could remain intact in the forms that had held it for centuries…

So it was into this tension between those in the Jewish community who wanted to hold onto the old forms (beautiful and sure and true as they were) and those, on fire with the stories of Jesus, who were sensing the necessity of leaving many of those old forms behind… It was into this tension that the writer of John's Gospel introduced the character of Nicodemus… a guy after my own heart, who thought

perhaps if he could just come to Jesus carrying all of his gold conduct stars for perfect adherence to the letter of the law, Jesus would applaud him for his knowledge, his expertise, his mastery of the things thought to be "essential" to Jewish tradition … (Nicodemus, it seems, having been moved deeply enough by what he had seen and heard from Jesus that he dared leave the "inner sanctum" of Pharisaic life, coming to him the darkness of that night, hoping to impress Jesus with all he knew, beginning with that statement of learned confidence, "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")…

Nicodemus, coming to Jesus hoping for affirmation of all he ***knew***, only to have Jesus call him to "leave what he already knew" behind… to leave the gold conduct stars behind… to leave his sense of "mastery" behind for the sake of being born into a mystery beyond all knowing… a mystery glimpsed as the wild windy Spirit of God opens eyes and hearts to see what can only be seen when the map of the "known world" ends…

The writer of John's Gospel doesn't tell us what happened after Jesus invited Nicodemus to let the windy spirit of God birth a new kind of knowing within him… But my guess is that he did what most of us would do in a similar situation… that is pack up his gold conduct stars and all the things he knew for sure, and after some polite if not half-hearted word of thanks, fade back into the certainty of his known world…

It's certainly what I was tempted to do at one point this past week, after leaving our home in Maine and driving the 426 miles to spend a few days with my daughter Sarah and her family in Mamaroneck, New York, just some 20 miles this side of NYC… Leaving the relative quiet and "known world" of Maine for the frenzy of traffic and commotion of New York being challenging enough of course… But nothing compared with the other "leaving" I was challenged to do… That call to "leave my known world" coming in this way….

So I have visited my daughter Sarah and her family a number of times, and whenever I do, I always walk my grandson August to school in the morning and back home at the end of the day. And over the two years Augie and I have traveled the ten or so blocks between home and school, I have been "blessed" by the attention of one particular crossing guard… a Latino man about my age, who always greets me with untold enthusiasm, asking me how things are in Maine, how long I'm going to be in New York, what my plans are for the duration of my stay, if I'd like to have coffee with him, because he'd like to have a conversation with me about some things that are important to him…

Well, when I walk my grandson to and from school, I come to this man's corner **knowing** a few things… I know he is a crossing guard, and I am a pastor… I know I have the benefits of being educated, sophisticated, and liberated by virtue of my station in life and my many experiences, while he… well… He's a crossing guard… I know I'm supposed to be "nice" to everyone, including crossing guards… even the ones who ask me a slew of questions and wonder if we could have a longer conversation about things that matter to him… I know I'm supposed to be nice. And so I am.

I come to this man's corner knowing these things. As well as knowing that I am me, and he is he, and ne'er shall the twain meet…

But this time, when I came to his corner, after receiving the traditional exuberant greeting, the Latino crossing guard reached into a bag behind him and gave me this book… a book entitled "Justice Unplugged"… a book, it turns out, that he had written… his second book, matter of fact… Both of them being historical retrospectives of economic and racial injustice in America… Both of them being a call to people like me to learn how systems that benefit my "group" always work at the expense of people like him… that is, people of color, people without connections to the halls of power, people who are so "othered" by the "educated, the sophisticated and the liberated" they're barely considered to be human beings worthy of dignity and respect and the pursuit of happiness…

I read this book during my stay in New York and in it saw pictures of Luis Quiros (which is the crossing guard's name) as well as a chronicle of his work in the community…

It turns out that Luis Quiros has a Master's degree in Public Administration and a Master's degree in Social Work. It turns out that he went to Union Theological Seminary and teaches at Fordham University. It turns out that he has a morning talk show on a New York City radio station, that he's gone to jail for standing up for the disenfranchised, and that what he wanted he wanted to talk to me about was his work and the possibility of coming to Maine to give some programs about justice…

It turns out that if you take the time to really look at him… really look at him, you will see that he has the most genuine smile and the most beautiful dark eyes… Eyes in which you sense your relationship not only to Luis, but to those in his beloved community and beyond, constellations of connections you never before imagined… And if you stand there long enough on a warm March morning and let Luis Quiros

into your “known world” you will see that you don’t know anything at all, except that there you are, with everything you thought you knew blowing down Mamaroneck Avenue in the March wind… including your gold conduct stars… And you don’t know if you should laugh or cry… You just know that something happened that feels a bit like being born again…

You just know that you have a choice then, between living from the world you know or the world that opens up when the map of the known world ends… Which is rather like the choice Jesus presented to Nicodemus…

What I want to say about Nicodemus, is that his knowledge of the law, his dedication to the Covenant, and his commitment to the practices of Jewish tradition were not something to be critiqued in the way we Christians so love critique the Pharisees, the Sadducees and all of the Jewish establishment of Jesus’ day… What Jesus was critiquing in our Gospel text for this morning was not Nicodemus’s knowledge, his commitment or his dedication to the law, but rather the way he depended upon those things for his security and identity… the way he used them to create his own image of God, who pretty much looked just like Nicodemus imagined him to look and rooted for the home team every time… the way he co-opted them to build barriers between himself and “others” who were not as “law-abiding” as he was…

It’s the way the old forms and the traditions tended to narrow his vision, harden his heart, separate him from “others”, and diminish the possibility of his **living in mystery** rather than **living for mastery** that Jesus objected to… It was those things Jesus was inviting Nicodemus to ***leave***, in exchange for a life lived in the unknown and windswept landscape called the Kingdom of God… a kingdom beyond the “known

world", where you gain your life by losing it, and power is made perfect in weakness, and the glory of God is most fully revealed in suffering love +, and it's possible to sense your connection to all of creation in the beautiful dark eyes of a Latino man who works as a crossing guard on a busy corner in Mamaroneck, New York as everything you thought you knew is blown to smithereens and carried away on the wind…

No wonder one theologian has said there can be no transformation without dislocation…

No wonder the root for the French word *"blessure*" can be translated as either "blessing" or "wound."

No wonder Nicodemus gathered his gold conduct stars and his notebooks full of rules for "mastering" the things of faith and slipped back into the "known world" after his encounter with Jesus…

It's not easy to leave the "known world" for places unknown… It's not easy to leave behind what we thought we knew, bringing into question some of the things we had always thought sacrosanct because they came by way of trusted pastors and teachers and parents and professors and institutions. And the truth is, I'm lately feeling this tug to leave behind some of those "sacrosanct knowings or certainties" particularly as they relate to my up-bringing in the Church, because the ruptures and tensions and threats to our world and to life as I have always "known" it have raised serious questions for me about the relevance, the intentions and the truth of what the Church has held up

as foundational teachings over so many centuries…. And causing me to ask…

Is it possible that the role of the Church is not so much to "save souls" or focus on insuring a "right" relationship between individuals and Jesus, but rather to help usher in the kingdom of God for all of creation with its passionate dedication to justice, reconciliation, and well-being for all?

Is it possible that Jesus' death on the cross was not so much a sacrifice of atonement to placate an angry God as it was a sign of Love's accompanying suffering love of all of creation? Love's willingness to take into Love's very body all the hatred and vitriol the world has to give, and to give back only love?

Is it possible that despite the Church's traditional interpretation of the Creation account as a go-ahead to "subdue" the earth in service to the needs and desires of human beings… Is it possible that the original intention of the creation story in Genesis 2 was to suggest an interdependence and balance between everything in the cosmos… An intimate relatedness…. A Garden of Eden… a peaceable kingdom where the lion lies down with the lamb and even the horseshoe crab is held in deepest reverence… Making it the Church's role then in these days of global climate crisis to listen to the prophets like Mary Oliver, as she invites us to read her poem "Who Said This?" alongside the creation accounts in Genesis, and then to live our lives from the mystery of their synthesis… Listen again…

Something whispered something

that was not even a word.

It was more like a silence

that was understandable.

I was standing at the edge

of the pond.

Nothing living, what we call living,

was in sight.

And yet, the voice entered me,

my body-life,

with so much happiness.

And there was nothing there

but the water, the sky,

the grass.

What would it mean for the Church, for the world, for the cosmos, if we were to leave the old ways of ***knowing*** the creation from a position of dominion and power-over, and instead returned to the ancient understanding of ***knowing***, which carried with it the mysterious, beyond-knowing, un-knowing of passionate, intimate, whole-hearted, full-bodied union? Rather like what can happen when we lie down in the grass by the pond and look up at the sky and listen to the silence… Or what can happen when we look deeply into the dark brown eyes of a Latino man who works as a crossing guard on a busy corner in Mamaroneck, New York…

What would it mean for the Church if we were to leave the old ways of knowing (the kind that have earned us so many gold conduct stars and the comfort of "institutional success")?.... What would it mean?...

It would mean that we might actually have a chance of being born again into the kingdom that lives and moves and sings and burns beyond the limitations and certainties of the known world…

It would mean that even as we catch a glimpse of God's presence in bread broken and wine poured out, in the image of a cross lifted up and Love stretched wide, and in many of the beautiful symbols and liturgies of the Church, we might also catch a glimpse of God's presence at the edge of the pond, in the grass, under the sky… in the whisper of something that's not even a word and in the beautiful dark eyes of a crossing guard in Mamaroneck, New York…

It would mean being brought to the end of all knowing, where there is a choice between living from the world we know or the world that opens up when the map of the known world ends… It would mean joining with people like Luis Quiros on behalf of racial and economic justice; it would mean joining with people like Greta Thunberg on behalf of our beautiful and suffering creation; it would mean joining with the modern-day prophets like Mary Oliver on behalf of creative expression born of pain and love…

And it would mean a return again and again and again in the dark nights of all of our lives to the person of Jesus, in whose presence our gold conduct stars are always cast to the wind…making us uncertain perhaps about whether we should laugh or cry… but knowing in the mystery of all unknowing, that by the power of love, we are forever being born again… So come, dear friends… I do believe the wind is blowing…