



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 8, 2020
GENESIS 12:1-4a; PSALM 121; ROMANS 4:1-5, 13-17; JOHN 3:1-17

NIGHT VISION

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."]

Early in our marriage, Chris had this great idea to go on a solo backpacking trip. I wasn't thrilled with the idea, but eventually, we agreed on a plan after he assured me he would be safe.

When he arrived at the trail head, he called to check in. Then, he said he would call the next morning after he was done. About 12:30 that night, the phone rang. When I answered, Chris told me he was back at the car, ready to come home. At first, I thought I mis-heard him. Then he repeated himself, this time with

more confidence. I remember thinking to myself: great, it is the middle of the night and we should both be asleep. Not only did you go backpacking on your own. You also decided to hike several miles on your own in the dark. So much for being safe! I didn't know whether to be delighted or angry with him.

Nicodemus tries to find his way in the dark, too. When he comes to Jesus, Nicodemus is searching for something. He brings what he knows: a faith informed by the world he inhabits, and the certainty that his worldview is more than enough.

But what Jesus says confuses him. The words make sense on their own, but not in the way Jesus uses them. How could words mean more than one thing at the same time? How is it possible to be born multiple times? Why would he need to see the world in a new way, anyway?

That's the problem with staying up in your head all the time. You become disconnected from other ways of knowing. You forget to pay attention to other parts of your body. You don't know how to listen to other people, let alone trust them. While objective data serves a purpose, it is not the only way of understanding the world. Concrete solidifies to form firm foundations. This Cathedral building is a testament to that fact. But it's

also possible to get trapped in that concrete. That was Nicodemus's challenge. He was stuck in place.

When Jesus nudges him, Nicodemus gets flustered. He asks Jesus "How is this possible?" Then, he is rendered speechless by what Jesus says next, and he vanishes from the scene, confounded by the most incredible news.

I wonder how many of you are tempted to check out when the news is hard or when you can't make sense of what's happening around you? What does your instinct tell you to do when your world starts to crumble around you?

Like Nicodemus, we continue to be confronted with an unending stream of unbelievable news. Each hour, the impact of COVID-19 seeps further into our lives. Every one of us has been impacted in some way. Even this place looks and sounds different. The font is dry. Our common prayers and hymns sound different, because the make-up of our assembly has changed. And yes, for the time being, except for the presider, we will have to imagine the bitter taste of wine as we feast on a sweet morsel of bread that is Christ's body.

Even though this is all temporary, there can be no denying that life is changing. I want to name now that many of those changes are

hard. Like many of you, I feel a level of anxiety rising in my bones I haven't felt in a long time. Like Nicodemus, my first instinct is to fade into the background, hoping all this will pass me by. But that's not an option now, any more than it is the anytime I find myself in such a vulnerable position. That's not how Jesus responds when he is confronted with unbelievable news, and that's not what he hopes any of us will do either.

Jesus challenges Nicodemus not to push him away. Instead, Jesus tries to free him from the trap that holds him in its grip. Jesus wants to extract us all from the grip of anything that drains life and hope from us. It's a pastoral thing, what Jesus does. Jesus longs for all of us to embrace life as God imagines for us. That includes embracing uncertainty and vulnerability and being curious about them rather than fearful of them.

God is always finding new ways to show up and remind us that all is not lost. God's promise stretches beyond anything we can ask or imagine, including our own human fears and hopelessness. God's creation emerges out of chaos. New community emerges out of grief and loss, and somehow, new life emerges out of death.

While God transcends all human experience, that does not mean God is absent from us.

Instead, God longs to be with us in the messiness of life, even in this mess. God's promise has always been about blessing first, about the joy of God fulfilled through all of humanity.

In her book *Rising Strong*, Brene Brown says, "vulnerability is not winning or losing; it is having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not weakness; it's our greatest measure of courage."¹ That's a pretty good definition of faith, too. It also takes a lot of courage to have faith, especially when the outcome is uncertain and out of our hands.

Nicodemus wonders how this can be. So may we.

In the coming days, resist the urge to run away and hide. Refuse to fade into the background, silenced by unbelievable news. Say no to the fear that swirls around and in you.

Instead, lean into what's unfolding. Be patient with yourself and others. Practice being a non-anxious presence with your family, neighbors, and for yourself. Keep connecting with each other and find new ways to nurture those relationships. Social distancing does not mean social isolation!

¹Brene Brown, *Rising Strong*, (New York: Random House, 2017), 4.

Call someone you haven't talked to in a while and listen to them. Send cards and text people you care about. Let them know you are thinking about them, and that you love them.

Remember to take care of yourself. If you can, go outside. Even if you can't, find a way to breathe in some fresh air and soak up daylight. Marvel at the new creation that is once again springing forth all around you. That's how the extraordinary presence of God is found in the ordinary moments of life.

Every Eucharist ends with a dismissal. This is not some perfunctory thing we do together to conclude the service. Nothing in liturgy is

perfunctory, really. Instead, the dismissal is an invitation. It is a reminder that our worship and our work continue in new ways and new places: beyond the walls of this Cathedral out and among the world. Listen to those words carefully today, and then go from this place and practice them.

Thanks be to God for the gift of this community and for all the ways you gather.

Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus, who offers us life in all its fullness.

Thanks be to God for your unfailing love through all that was and is and is to come.

Amen.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!