



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REV. LINZI STAHLECKER, CURATE  
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 5, 2023  
GENESIS 12:1-4A; PSALM 121; ROMANS 4:1-5,13-17; JOHN 3:1-17

## STAY CURIOUS

*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."]*

Anyone who's ever spent any time around a young child will be very familiar with the "why?" phase of life. All kinds of things can be met with a "Why?" Everything from "it's time for bed" or to eat, or you need to get dressed, or we're leaving the house is met with "why?" There are larger

'why?' questions too, why is the sky blue, why is the moon round, why is broccoli so important? And this is good. Because there's a lot to learn when you're very young. What things are, as well as ideas. Learning about how the world works and a little of your place in it. Learning from

those around you what's important and what's not, learning how to filter information pouring in from a wildly stimulating world so that it doesn't overwhelm, so that some sense can be made, and some steadiness found in a world that is new and unexplained at every turn.

In our culture it seems as though we go through something similar again as we cross the threshold into adulthood. In our teens or early twenties, we step out. Having to process a whole heap of new things about where we are and who we're going to be with, having to pay attention in a new way to keep ourselves safe and to navigate each next life step. We might be free to re-evaluate, to test some of the ideas and values we've brought with us from childhood, to see whether they really fit or whether our new receptivity to this wider world is opening us up to different ways of thinking, unexplored and creative new ways of seeing and being in the world. As with those much younger years, early adulthood can be another time of great potential, of becoming. Young adults often encounter the world for the first time in a direct way, without the buffer of

their caregivers or schools or the familiarities of childhood.

And then, at some point, maybe after we've worked for a while, paid bills for a while, perhaps partnered, perhaps started a family, we close down somewhat and just get on with the demanding task of living, of coping, of surviving. Staying wide open to it all, staying hyper-receptive is really energy expensive, so eventually, we'll opt for the efficiency of just getting on with it. And soon, the world that shaped us, that laid down so many significant memories and forming moments, that world is gone, it's passed away; because the world is always forming and re-forming, changing with each arriving generation. ... so we might even look out one day and feel different to or alienated from what the world has become, unable to recognize the world we once felt was ours, that world that *we* knew.

Nicodemus, Jesus' conversation partner in today's gospel reading, is likely in this phase of life. Established, somewhat settled, putting those ways of thinking he developed in his younger years to use, to help him navigate life, to help him cope,

help him survive. And then along comes Jesus. This newness cannot be ignored, but Jesus' teaching doesn't fit into any of Nicodemus' established ways of making sense of the world. Nicodemus has stayed just open enough, just curious enough to notice that something new and important is changing in the world he lives in, something new that he doesn't understand. We might imagine the great amount of energy it took for Nicodemus, an established leader in his community, to admit that there was a gap in his understanding, that he needed to once again be a learner, to learn what and who Jesus was and what his teachings meant. He needed to ask some questions.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night – the time of darkness, which I see, in the gospel of John, as being symbolic, representative of potential, the darkness representing the formlessness of possibility that gives rise to something new, to some new expression of life. Much like the darkness of the womb before birth.

By the time we're set in adulthood, most of us will have been "re-born", developmentally speaking, at least twice, first as a young child, being 're-born' as it

were into self-awareness, placing themselves in the wider world as they begin to separate a little from their primary caregiver, and then again, being 're-born' as a young adult as a fuller independence calls us to step yet further into the unknown. Eventually though we settle, and our repeated habits of thought, our established judgements, our adopted and guarded ideologies begin to limit us somewhat, leaving us somewhat closed off from others and from God.

Jesus, through his exchange with the curious and questioning Nicodemus, is pointing us to that openness and receptivity that's characteristic of early stages of our becoming. Be born anew, Jesus tells us, be born from above, by being open and receptive to the fullness of the Spirit that flows through you. Open up your thinking and your doing, sense that which is beyond time and place, and be formed and be changed; emerge through this re-birth, into a new life stage, closer to God, and bound by love to life, and so begin to know something of the eternality of life that is very real and very present.

Likely, we may never have felt quite so alive as in those years when we're most

open to the world around us, being shaped by it, paying attention to it all and allowing ourselves to become who we are being called to be. It is to this state of being that Jesus is pointing us, for *this* re-birth – at any age or stage of life. To know the Kingdom of Heaven is to know life, to know it deliciously and abundantly, and Jesus is the Way. To believe in him is to feel that promise in our very being, and to trust it ... but first, we must be curious, stay curious, ask questions, cultivate an

openness and receptivity to the ever-present newness in the world around us that is always arising, to the lives and the creative ways of living that surround us, lives through which we can sense and understand the eternal presence of God in brilliant new ways, in ways that would form us anew and transform us, re-born for the Kingdom.



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