

John 3:1-17  
June 7, 2009

Trinity Sunday  
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One in six American adults suffers from chronic insomnia. We are a nation of people who don't sleep well. What's keeping you up at night these days? A job because you work the night shift? Anxiety about kids, parents, school, violence, finances, illness? Or the big questions – is this all there is? Am I doing it right? Questions we don't want others to know we ask. Perhaps on these sleepless nights many of us look at our lives and ask, like Nicodemus – How can these things be?

It's not like we're just laying around. We're really trying to solve it all, make it all right, create a better life that isn't plagued by such questions. So we search for the perfect book, try new diets, new religions, new jobs, follow programs to look better, be better, re-invent and transform ourselves. Of course, all of these abundant opportunities for self-improvement just confirm what we already suspected - that we simply are not good enough as is.

We look around at our lives and our world and wonder, "How can these things be?" Maybe that's even why we come to church. We are looking for insight, some tips, a way to improve ourselves, or maybe even a way to settle our minds and hearts when we try to rest. Surely a church will have the answers that will let us sleep at night.

And there *are* plenty of religious folks who seem to have a solution to these nagging feelings- and they love this passage. Be born again. Choose to be born again and you're whole life will fall into place! I'm suspicious of that promise. And it is troubling that being born again becomes just another thing *I* can do to transform my life – no different than something we might read on the cover of a magazine or in a pop-up ad on the internet. But the gospel of John this morning seems to be up to more than a simple, solution-oriented, quick and easy fix.

Today we have our fellow curious insomniac, Nicodemus. It is night time. Others are safe at home having family time, reading a book or snuggled up in bed. But on this night Nicodemus is coming to Jesus. Perhaps the nagging questions in his sleepless head had gone on long enough and with this desperate hunger for peace, for answers, he is drawn towards Jesus in the night.

In the darkness he comes to Jesus, alone as far as we know. But Nicodemus begins the conversation by saying, "Rabbi, *we* know that you are a teacher who has come from God...." Who's the "we"? The story seems to leave room for the rest of us who happen to be up at night to come with him. There is room for us to bring our questions we'd only ask in the dark, those wonderings that keep us from sleep. Do we dare go along with him? Let's take a chance and join Nicodemus. It's okay, it's dark out – no one will see us.

Nicodemus marvels at the signs he has seen of Jesus. Jesus responds that "no one can see the kingdom of heaven without being born from above." How do you even begin to respond to that? Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a religious leader. He's used to having things make sense to him so that he can teach others about the faith. This is a more than a little confusing. But wanting to listen well in the hopes that this man might be offering him some way to see the kingdom of God, some insight into life, he briefly entertains the idea of whether it is indeed possible to enter his mother's womb a second time. Had his mother been there, she surely would have answered for him.

Jesus then says, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."

Thanks, Jesus. Another crystal clear response.

Since we all have some expertise in the area – all of us having been born at least once, let's think about that experience first. We were born through no consent of our own, no choice of our own, and we have no memory of the experience. We were also born into things we had no control over – born into a geographic location, born into a certain family, born into a certain skin color, a

particular gender. Our birth determined quite a bit of who we are, for good or bad, and everything in between.

Your status in birth was particularly important in ancient times as your family gave you your identity and it locked you into a particular stratus of society. So, to think about being born from above, born again, opened up a whole new world of possibility. Because if you were born from above, who's your parent? God. Who determines your identity and your status? God.

In order to see the kingdom of God, you must be born from above, Jesus tells Nicodemus (and those of us still standing quietly in his shadow.) In order to see the kingdom of God, you must have a new parent, a new family, a new identity – you must belong to another realm. That sounds hard. Harder than the magazine article offering life transformation in 6 easy steps.

But if we're talking about birth, why do we think that we must be the ones to make it happen? Or who even *can* make it happen? Perhaps this birth is just as mysterious and out of our control as the first one. "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." – That's what a life looks like that is born from above – of Spirit and water. A life that is mysterious and moving.

Usually when people talk about being born again, it's described as a choice we make, or at least an effort we make, and it's usually a very individual God-and-me experience. But what Jesus is talking about with Nicodemus is being born from above in order to see and enter the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God that is wide and expansive, and now contains brothers and sisters that we never even knew we had – and a lot of them.

Jesus' call to be born from above is not a command for self-improvement but an invitation into community – into the kingdom of God community. Being born from above links us to all of God's family. Martin Luther King Jr understood this as he wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail – "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." This is the kingdom of God.

That'll give you something to keep you up at night, worrying about the family that now spans continents and languages, races and classes and includes people I don't understand and maybe don't even like.

And if we really believe in this kingdom of God family, then it does make some things more difficult. A couple weeks ago in our Town Hall budget meetings, several times the idea was raised that we should "take care of our own first" – meaning that we should not give so much money to those outside our community, that we had to focus on our family first. So it does matter who we think of as family. So what if "our own" and "family first" took into account *all* of our brothers and sisters, born of the same parent, raised in the same family? All of God's kids born from above.

Again, as if you didn't have enough to worry about – now the family just got bigger. Go ahead and join your voice to Nicodemus as we all sigh, "How can these things be?" It *is* overwhelming! We can't hold the world ourselves, can't solve all its problems, can't birth ourselves into someone superhuman to take care of everyone. But maybe that's okay. Maybe that's even the point.

Because if we listen to Jesus, that is not what is being asked of us. The birthing parent above, the Spirit and the water are the active ones. Being born is something that is done to us. It is not by our own will or determination or hard work.

Jesus doesn't tell Nicodemus what he should do. He tells him what God is already doing – "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."

Being born into the kingdom of God comes with a birthrite that is eternal. For the writer of John's gospel, eternal life is *always* paired with a present tense verb – to have eternal life is to have it right now. We can't bring it about or control it. We can only live it.

Although, sorry to say, that even with eternal life, there is night. But notice that Jesus is in the darkness with Nicodemus. And that Nicodemus doesn't magically come into the light after his encounter with Jesus. So there's hope for us. In fact, Nicodemus' last words in the passage exhibit anything but enlightenment as he cries, "How can these things be?"

But this isn't the last time we hear from Nicodemus in John's gospel. Nicodemus' final appearance in the gospel is when he joins Joseph of Arimathea to take away Jesus' body, ritually wrapping him in spices and linen cloths and laying him in the tomb. Perhaps the light has been dawning in his own heart, as he cares for this one he has come to follow, has come to call family.

Birth is a process – like the movement from night to day. We know this from our first birth – we didn't come out knowing how to talk or read, or even that our toes existed. We discovered those things. Jesus meets Nicodemus and us at night but doesn't leave us there. We enter into the birthing process together and hopefully the light begins to break through.

New members (Gabriel, Jason, Melissa, Greg, Fiona and Korinne) – gather around baptismal font today – around water and the Spirit. It is not part of the deal that they have to have it all figured out or promise to be perfect new members. Today they affirm their baptism, which is to say, they affirm that God is up to things in their lives and our world that are beyond our own hopes, abilities, and desires – and we're going to try our best to live together in that Spirit-filled mystery.

And part of that living in the mystery might mean the daring, scary, challenging act of ---- going to sleep. Edward Hays says that sleep "is a beautiful expression of prayer since it is resting in God. It is letting go of control of our life....." So sleep well, Nicodemus. Sleep well, children from above. Close your eyes and rest -- as a radical act of faith.