

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Our lessons today are all about encounters with God.

And the demands they place upon us.

In the Gospel of John

it is Nicodemus who blunders into God.

Nicodemus is a Greek name meaning conqueror of the people.

He was a well educated leader of the community,

a member of the Sanhedrin, the 70 member ruling body of the Jews.

He was well off and pretty much at the top of his profession.

He would have made a good episcopalian.

He was very comfortable with his station

and with his understanding of his religion.

He comes to Jesus because he had heard that Jesus was a good teacher

and he wanted to ask him a few questions that have been bothering him.

To put this all in perspective,

this incident takes place right after Jesus has come to the temple in Jerusalem

and pretty much trashed the joint,

turning over chairs and tables and generally raising Cain.

I am quite sure that Jesus was the topic of some heated discussion

at the next meeting of the Sanhedrin.

I suspect that Nicodemus is perhaps

trying to find out who the *real* Jesus is;

the teacher or the hooligan.

I wonder if he had any idea of what he was actually getting himself into

as he stood outside that door in the dark?

He had come to speak quietly with the man Jesus.

He was about to meet God.

As Nicodemus talked with Jesus that dark night,
he was confronted with God,
a God that was outside of his understanding.

He struggled to understand,
using all of his education and wits,
but he just didn't get it.

All too often, neither do we.

If you look with honesty,
his responses really aren't all that different from any that we would have made.

It's a common response when we encounter something we don't understand.

We attack it with our brains, we use our science on it.

But that's a mistake.

It's a mistake because we confuse mystery with ignorance;
the unknowable from the merely unknown.

Don't get me wrong.

I'm not saying science is a bad thing.

It's a good thing.

Science, with time, can convert the unknown into the known,

but even with all the time in the world,
science is useless on the unknowable.

It's the wrong tool for the job.

As I said before, the unknowable is mystery,
and with mystery we must live in it
and with it
and let it surround us.

Jesus tells Nicodemus, "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."

It is this wind, what the Jews call *ruah*, and the Greeks *pneuma*,
and what we now know as the Holy Spirit,
that gives us the eyes to truly see mystery in the world around us.

To encounter God in the everyday stuff of life.

We are all born with this gift,
it's easy to see in the light of a child's eyes,
but as we grow up it is far too easy to lose.

A child will gaze in rapt wonder
at the intricate comings and goings of ants working to build an ant hill.

When was the last time you watched ants at work?

I know, I know we have much more important things to do.

We don't have time to waste on something as silly as watching ants.

And besides, it's still winter.

OK how about watching a sunset?

Or maybe we could look at the stars tonight.

These are only everyday things,
but they are deeply woven into the mystery of God,
as is all of God's creation.

When Jesus tells Nicodemus,

"If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe,
how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things,"
he is telling him, and telling us as well,
that this is where one can start.

TAKE the time it takes to see the mystery of everyday things;
to let the mystery work on you.

Often in Lent we decide to take on a new discipline.

We pray more.

We go to church more.

We read the Bible more.

If we just pile these disciplines onto an already busy life
we set ourselves up for the worst kind of failure.

We just get busier,
and so these added activities just become a burden
that we soon resent.

Like Nicodemus, we get the right answer,
but we don't really hear it; we don't really understand it.

We need to make time
to take the time
to let the mystery work.

That means shifting priorities;
choosing not to do certain things so that we have time to do other things.

It is this re-ordering of our lives that gives us a new perspective.

And It is this new perspective of life in the Spirit,
of being born from above,
That changes the way we look at the world.

Being born again,
we can, once again, see the world through the eyes of a child.

Remember the prayer in the service of Baptism that lists the gifts of the Spirit?

“..an inquiring and discerning heart,
the courage to will and to persevere,
a spirit to know and love you,
and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.”

These are the gifts that come with this new perspective.

This is how the Spirit comes to life and works in our lives.

For Nicodemus,
this new perspective allowed him the courage
to be the lone voice in the Sanhedrin to actually defend Jesus,
forestalling his arrest, at least for a time.

It also gave him the compassion to care for the lifeless body of Christ,
preparing it for burial in the tomb.

For Abram and Sarai,

as we heard in the reading from Genesis,

this new perspective allowed them the courage

to leave behind all that they knew and were comfortable with,

even their names,

and start a new life in a new land.

Who knows what the Spirit has in store for us.

The only thing I can tell you,

the one thing we must constantly be prepared for,

is that it will be outside the box,

and sometimes way outside the box.

Outside the box of our limited perceptions and expectations.

We don't know how Nicodemus responded to Jesus' remarks,

John doesn't say.

The narrative jumps abruptly to the next scene

with Jesus moving out into the countryside the next morning.

That doesn't surprise me.

It takes time for the seeds of the spirit planted that night

to spring forth in a faith that pushes Nicodemus out of his box.

For Abram and Sarai it was quicker.

No sooner has the Lord finished speaking,

than they pull up stakes and head for Canaan.

At least that is how it is related in Genesis.

One never knows with the Spirit.

“The Spirit 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.”

As we enter deeper into this season of Lent,

and make our way out of the somnambulance of COVID,

I invite you to be prepared to move beyond the limits we place on ourselves
and into the place of new perspectives.

See the world with eyes of hope.

Listen to the world with ears of grace.

Lift up the world with hands of justice.

Embrace the world with arms of love.

As the psalmist says,

“I lift up my eyes to the hills;

from where is my help to come?

My help comes from the LORD,

the maker of heaven and earth.

The LORD shall preserve you from all evil;

it is he who shall keep you safe.

The LORD shall watch over your going out and your coming in,
from this time forth for evermore.”

Amen. Indeed.