Sermon on John 3:1-17 Lent 2 Year A

Under the influence of a deluge of information we often just want the newscaster, the speaker, the preacher to “get to the point;” when reading a story we can find ourselves getting impatient; why can’t I just get “the gist of the story?”

Nothing drives novelists and poets to fury faster then the following question at a cocktail party, “so what’s your book about?” or even worse, “Can you summarize your novel for me?”

To try to summarize is precisely to *miss* the point, for the novel or the poem *is* the point! There is no gist, just the story, there are no Cliff Notes to a poem, only the poem.

Oh I get why we do it; we feel we simply don’t have the time. But when we do, what we get is something different than the story.

Another analogy might help us. What’s the reality, the experience of 80 years including all the innumerable feelings, commitments, successes and failures of a life lived, or the small blurb in the newspaper that we call an obituary? That’s what we call a rhetorical question!

During Lent, during what we call Year A, we are exposed to a series of stories from John’s gospel that resist reduction to a couple of points or to summaries.

It’s one of the distinguishing features of John: a series of stories that are longer than anything in Matthew, Mark and Luke; stories that are filled with dialogue and discourse and in which one has to pay attention to all the words and all the sections.

It is these extraordinary conversations with Jesus that shape the heart of Lent in this particular year of the Lectionary Cycle.

Each of the stories is put together in such a way to draw us into the conversation. The very way John writes is an invitation for each of us to encounter Christ through these words and then in the Sacrament.

We are meant to identify with Nicodemus. He’s heard the stories of Israel so many times; maybe we’ve heard the story of Nicodemus so many times; we’ve heard terms like “born-again,” verses like Jn 3:16, maybe hundreds of times.

Though he’s having a “come to Jesus” moment, he’s still pretty sure of himself, speaking of the intelligentsia that he’s part of he says “*we* *know* that you are a teacher who has come from God.”

Jesus unsettles all that “church knowledge” by saying “Very truly, I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born *anothen*.”

I used the Greek work there because I’m trying to disorient you the same way Jesus is trying to disorient Nicodemus.

More about *anothen* in a minute. For now, here’s what matters: purposeful suspension of what we know.

It’s what we do when we pick up a novel, when we go to see a movie; to enjoy the story, to let that movie bring you to tears, we purposefully forget that this story originated in a writer’s mind, that what we are seeing is nothing more than a series of still pictures racing before our eyes.

What do you “know about Jesus” that needs to be suspended for a few minutes?

Back to the Greek word *anothen*. Some versions translate it with the famous “born again,” others like our version translate it as “born from above.”

Here’s the irony, where Jesus is using an ambiguous word with several meanings to free Nicodemus’ mind, to open him to new divine possibilities, this same word has been used in North America to nail down a certain type of conversion experience that is meant to define what a Christian is!

To be “born-again,” has come to mean a right-wing, politically conservative type of Christian! It’s a perfect example of what happens when you take John’s Gospel and try to boil it down to a single point; you lose it; you lose the experience that it points to, and you’re in danger of losing Christ himself!

This is probably why the mainline church, in opposition to fundamentalism, has used the other translation option, “born from above!” But folks in our tradition are in danger of simply repeating the fundamentalist mistake from a different perspective!

“Born from above” can sound so ethereal so other worldly, so disengaged from experience, precisely what “born-again” emphasizes—a visceral experience of God—that it ends up sounding like nothing of great importance.

But what is needed is both and more! As Jesus seeks to open up Nick’s mind in the middle of “what he knows” we need to have our own minds opened to new things that come from God’s initiative (from above) but that impact us in our guts, in our womb, that place where passion and creativity and will and “want to” come from (born-again).

What we need is the encounter Jesus is bringing to us today, in our lives, whether we come to him at night or in the heat of the day, as we’ll see from next week’s story!

As we move from Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus into his discourse, including the famous 3:16 we’re drawn into something deeper, stranger and more unsettling than individualistic religious experience, however important that is, and it is!

This birthing, again, emphasizing the human element, or from above, the divine element is via a lifting up of Jesus on a cross.

God’s initiative and ongoing conversion of life comes from the nexus of the cross, to craft a tautology!

For those of us in the church in which the word and the symbol is everywhere we hardly notice it or hear it, but if we are able to suspend our knowledge for even a minute we’ll be asking a question with as much incredulity as Nicodemus: “How does a death on Rome’s supreme weapon of political power bring about change for the better in our world?”

It would be like claiming that what’s going on in Washington these days will bring about a revolution in political truth, virtue and positive change for our hurting planet!

The story of John is a cosmic version of “come with me down the Rabbit hole!”

*Anothen* is complicated to interpret because it’s pointing to a new mode of life without any precedent: life born of water *and* the Spirit…via the Cross.

This then helps us sidle up to John 3:16, “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.”

When our basic posture to life is openness to God “above and again;” When we wrestle in an ongoing way with the fact that God is able to use even the very worst things to bring about human transformation (this is why John references the story of Moses and the serpents here, a story I don’t have time to unpack except to notice how what killed now, with God, heals!) we begin to experience this different quality of life, what John’s gospel calls *eternal life*, God’s hopeful love made real!

Finding ourselves not in a “cliff notes version” of living but in a wide expansive life, with all kinds of plot twists and turns, the last chapters promising to be the best yet!

I recently re-watched the movie *Dr. Strange* in which Dr. Stephen Strange (A Marvel Comic figure, actually) loses his career as a famous neurosurgeon through a car accident.

In a desperate bid for healing he’s led to the lair of a great sorcerer, the Ancient One, who shows him the truth of the universe and his identity in a very discombobulating way, analagous to what Jesus does with and for Nicodemus

Strange has to fight to unlearn what he knows, as Nick does, as we do.

He struggles to put healing into practice; in words that find their roots in our tradition, he’s called to “change his mind,” and “surrender his ego” because though he thought he became a doctor for others, in reality, he realizes, he became a doctor for himself.

“It’s not about you, it never has been” is one of the powerful lines the Ancient One uses to reorient him:

You can assert yourself, you can fight for yourself, but unless you’re born *anothen* you won’t know God’s quality of life!

This Lent, allow yourself to struggle with this very real conundrum.

Nic will make two more appearances in John; each one more courageous than the next. In chapter 7 he will ask whether the leaders aren’t judging Jesus too hastily; he’s ridiculed for his even this.

 And then right at the end: it seems he’s kept exploring, kept encountering and praying about what Jesus has shared with him; so much so that at the end he will risk everything, at the most dangerous time, to be known as one who follows Jesus; but he couldn’t have been there without first being *anothen*.

The story *is* the point!