

Lent 2A  
John 3:1-17

There's something about the darkness of nighttime that seems to wake up the worrying part of my brain.

I suspect this is true for many of us,  
As there's no shortage of advice out there for helping people who fret at night,  
Or make lists in their heads while in bed,  
Or Google things that worry them because they can't sleep.

I know I find that my fears and worries look different in the light of day than how large and looming they feel at night.

It's not every night that I'm up dealing with the demons of fret and worry,

And I've had plenty of sweet, peaceful 3AM moments in the rocking chair with a little one—

Moments that certainly override my anxieties.

But there's no doubt that nighttime, for those whose life and work calls them to be awake during the day, can hold us hostage to our numerous thoughts and questions.

If we find ourselves awake and our brains annoyingly active,  
There's not a lot we can do about it until morning comes.

In our Gospel today, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night to talk with him.

And we don't know what time it was,  
How early or late in the evening,  
But it was important enough for the writer to note that it was nighttime.

Nicodemus seeks Jesus out,  
And Jesus is there.  
Jesus is ready for a chat,  
Even at night.

There's a mysterious feel about this nighttime Gospel story.  
There's no scenery to imagine but shadows,  
No visuals but the two silhouettes of Jesus and Nicodemus.

And Jesus doesn't help us out much with the visuals,  
Because the subject matter of this conversation is about  
mysterious things.

Jesus talks about being born from above,

Which can also be translated as "born again."

Nicodemus understandably asks, "How can anyone be born after having  
grown old?"

He can't see this image,

He can't grasp this concept.

And so Jesus offers the image of wind,

Again, something we can't see.

"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."

Being re-born,

Born again,

Born from above adds to the mystery of this whole evening  
encounter with Jesus.

Because we know and understand Jesus to be talking about baptism—

When the water and the Word mingle together to wash us clean,

To set us free from sin,  
To drown us and raise us,  
To re-birth us.

We know about and speak about and live out our baptism and being born again,

Born of the Spirit,  
Born from above.

Yet it's still quite a mystery.

A lot of our baptized life is living in and wondering the same question as Nicodemus. . .

“How can these things be?”

The evening conversation continues with Jesus speaking of the most profound mystery of all—

The mysterious act and sacrifice of Jesus lifted up onto a cross for all to see,

That mysterious truth that death leads to life,  
That life only comes through death.

Our God comes to us in mystery.

And no, not like “God works in mysterious ways,” though that can feel true, too.

But more like, God is a mysterious way.

Our God chooses to redeem the world rather than condemn it.

We are not done-for.

We are not stuck here.

We are not too far gone for God to work mystery and redeem us.

We walk through this season of Lent towards that cross on which Jesus died a tortured death,  
towards that moment of our ultimate guilt. . .  
that even though we weren't there 2 thousand years ago,  
we contributed to Jesus' death.

We walk towards that moment of ultimate mystery. . .  
That even though we weren't there 2 thousand years ago, Jesus saved us.  
Before we were even born, Jesus saved us from our death.

Our God comes to us in mystery,  
And we continue to ask with Nicodemus,  
"How can these things be?"  
The mysteries of God always lead us to ask that question—  
How can that water save us as it drowns us?  
How can Jesus really be here in this bread and cup?  
How can we be both sinner and redeemed?  
How can we be one body when we are so  
divided?

How can these things be?

Living in the world as re-born, born-from-above children of God,  
We ask,  
How can we continue to live in these times of such discord,  
uncertainty, and distrust of our fellow humans?  
How can it be that our sisters and brothers still  
struggle for equality, for acceptance, for our embrace  
as God's family?

How can it be that violence still manages to rule  
the day,

that fear still manages to paralyze us from  
reaching out to one another,

that my needs and wants continue to  
take precedence over others?

How can it be that our bodies are stricken with illness,

And chronic pain. . .

That our minds are bound by those anxieties and worries,

When this was not the life we imagined for ourselves?

When life was supposed to turn out differently?

How can it be that God breathes life into our broken,

Sinful,

Dead selves?

How can it be that God makes beautiful things out of the dust?

How can these things be?

When Nicodemus asks that question,

A question seeking more,

A question begging for clarity when all seemed shrouded in  
darkness. . .

Jesus answers with the one-line story that re-births the  
world—

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only  
Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish  
but may have eternal life.”

A story of a God who so loves the world,

A story of a God who chooses to graciously redeem rather than  
rightfully condemn,

A story of a God who loves and wants  
us for eternity. . .

And will stop at nothing to wrap  
us up in that love.

It is in the nighttime,

In the dark,

In the questions,

In the journey to the cross,

That we hear again the story of a God who is so  
mysterious,

And yet never leaves us in the dark.