

Sermon – John 3:1-17
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Grace Lutheran Church
2 Lent – Year A
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“From the Top”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The boys had a half-day of school on Thursday, so we decided to treat ourselves. We got some drive-thru fast food and then made our way to the car wash. Do not accuse of us not knowing how to have a good time! But a strange thing happened to us in the car wash. The conveyor belt kept moving our car forward, just as it should. The car in front us, however, had come to a complete stop. I don't know if the car wash failed in some way or if the driver had his foot on the brake. I just know that the car wash started ramming our car into the car in front of us. The boys and I were sitting there helplessly through three very low-speed collisions. We couldn't go back. We couldn't go forward. And while this only lasted handful of seconds, the seconds were incredibly long. What if we were stuck there forever, endlessly running into the car in front of us? Lifting up our eyes not to the hills, but to the long blue cloths going back and forth across our windshield, we wondered from where our help would come. It certainly wasn't going to come from us; there was nothing we could do. Driving away when our great ordeal was over, I thought, “Huh. I bet that's how Nicodemus felt when he was talking with Jesus.”
2. Nicodemus, this Pharisee and teacher, gets as far as he can get on his own. He comes to Jesus by night, intrigued by this new teacher, Jesus, but also no doubt confident in his own understanding. But the longer the conversation

lasts, the more Nicodemus ends up trapped in a confusing darkness. Jesus throws him off from the get-go, telling him that he won't be able to see God at work without being born *anōthen*. In our translation today, that's "born from above." In others, it's "born again." It could also be "born anew." Jesus likely has all three meanings in mind: If you want to see the reign of God, you must be born again, from above, in a new way. In the dark of night, Nicodemus imagines an even darker place. Must I, he muses, enter into my mother's womb? If it sounds funny, that's because it is. Imagine how his mother would feel about that! Nicodemus needs a new birth that he does not understand. He knows he can't go back, but where is the way forward? He's gotten himself as far as he can with nothing to show for it.

3. We humans have a knack for this. Whatever our intentions, we seem to end up stuck in the same spots over and over again, unable to go back, unable to find a way forward. So, we try the same things over and over again. Like war. I woke yesterday to a flurry of notifications on my phone, each telling me the same thing: We are at war with Iran. My heart sank. Not because I had any love for the Ayatollah or his regime, built on terror and the abuse of human rights. My heart sank because war is always lamentable. Because lives will be lost on all sides. Because it is unclear what we're even trying to accomplish. I could go on. But the point is that here we are again, humans on all sides committed to the cycles of warfare and violence and death when what God desires is life. How long, O Lord? From where is our help to come? Perhaps God will work through us. Yesterday, Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land issued a statement, including these words: "Now is the time for the global body of Christ to embody its vocation as peacemaker, seeking not the quiet of managed conflict, but the costly, just peace that transforms hearts, structures, and the life of our region." Yes. Now is the time to work for life.

4. Having seen humanity go off the rails time and time again in the first eleven chapters, God decides to make a fresh start, to call a people who will be the means of blessing all families of the earth. All families. God comes to Abram calling him to journey to a new land, hundreds of miles away, to which he and Sarai have never been. What sense does that make? They don't even have a child, so "great nation" seems a bit of a stretch. It's farcical but they go. Why? Because the call makes sense? No. Because they trust the One who calls. It is the very definition of a leap of faith. Either they go or they don't, and going makes all the difference. Abram and Sarai are living in Haran at this point in time. According to one pastor's commentary, the name Haran means "crossroads." And that's exactly what it was for our forebears in faith. They could have ignored the call, trusting in their own plans for their lives, choosing a different path. Instead, they went, trusting in God's plan for this whole world and its people.

5. Two thousand years later. Nicodemus is at a crossroads. While Jesus' words don't make sense according to the ways of the world, Nicodemus is invited to put his faith in Jesus. Jesus is walking his own road, and it is heading straight to the cross. He will be lifted up for all to see, looking for all the world forgotten and shamed. And yet it is here in what seems to be the darkest moment that new life and light burst forth. The Spirit, blowing where it will, calls us to look upon Jesus and gives us eyes of faith to believe, to trust, that this Jesus is the salvation of the world. That in him, even though we will yet die, we will not perish but will receive eternal life. Here is the birth from above of which Jesus speaks – not a second birth from the womb but a new birth from the tomb. We worship the God who has conquered death, and that makes us people of life. For all families and nations of the earth, we are called to the ways of life and peace.

6. I'm not sure why Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Perhaps he was ashamed of his curiosity, or worried about what the other Pharisees would

say. Perhaps it's just good story telling; he was, after all, in the dark. I was reminded this week while reading *The Christian Century* of Barbara Brown Taylor's *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. While we tend to fear the dark or use it for furtive purposes, Taylor reminds us that "new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark." Our faith begins in at the crossroads in the darkness. We can't go back; neither can we see a way forward. From where will our help come? In the darkness, a voice speaks: "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." Jesus makes the way; Jesus *is* the way. This is the free gift of grace. Life. For all the world. Life. For you. Life. Forever. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.