

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

March 12, 2017; the 2nd Sunday in Lent

Readings: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17.

A Point of Departure - A New Beginning

Commenting on Psalm 121, David Burns writes,

“This psalm begins at the point of departure.

A destination is in sight, and it looks to the pilgrim as if

God is calling for him, or he at least hopes to find

God at that destination.

The Pilgrim sees the hills but is a little intimidated at the challenge.

He cannot make this journey alone and wonders where to look for confidence and support.”¹

Is this what it was like for Nicodemus, that dark night when he went searching for Jesus?

Did Nicodemus sense that his journey into God could not be made alone or in the same way as in the past?

What it is like for us - this journey into God - this exploration of faith, day after day, week after week, year after year?

We come to church, we study, we pray, we seek, how do we find and know God?

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 1, Loc 2406 of 20029.

How do we find and know who we are for God?
And how do we find and know God at different stages of
our lives, when answers of the past are not enough
and we long for a lived experience of the holy?

Is that what it was like for Nicodemus?

Nicodemus a Pharisee, leader, a teacher, he knew about
Jesus, the signs that Jesus had done, and so he
goes to him to learn.

What Jesus tells him confuses him.

“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born
from above (also translated, again, or anew).”

Nicodemus then tried to understand this in worldly terms,
in an exact sort of way -- how can anyone be born
after having grown old -- can one enter a second
time into the mother's womb and be born?

Being born again.

Many of us here today in the Episcopal Church having
been so turned off by Christians who told us we
had to be born again...and they often had a very
specific thing in mind by saying that...much
like Nicodemus.

But Jesus responds by lifting us into the realms of angels,
where our rational minds are not the primary vehicle

for understanding.

No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

The wind/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.

We hear Jesus say that we can't see the kingdom or enter without being of the Spirit.

This is not primarily about heaven...this is about being part of the Kingdom, the Reign of God now...seeing it and being part of it.

In our confirmation class/discipleship study today after church we are discussing just this matter, because one of the Marks of Mission, one of the ways that we are for God in the world, is to be those who speak about, and show forth through our actions, the kingdom of the God, the reign of God, now.

We TELL - we have good news to share.

What is your good news to share?

When have you felt most alive or at peace?

The answers to such questions can help us hear the

sound wind/the Spirit moving about.

Through Baptism, we are born again, we are born anew,
marked as Christ's own forever.

By water and the Spirit, we begin a new life in God.

But what we realize, as we grow, is that we continue to be
born again, made new again and again, by the Spirit
at work in our lives...in our lives as individuals,
members of a family, and members of our
faith community.

Baptism is the beginning of this journey into God as a
Christian, but it is only through the years, and in
community with others, that we are formed more
and more to see and proclaim the great
gifts of grace associated with God's
reign -- peace, justice, healing,
hope, love.

We need each other -- for support when the forces of
darkness seem to gain a foothold -- we need each
other to discern the movement of the Spirit in our
lives, in our community -- for that wind, that
Spirit, blows where it chooses we hear
it, here and there, we don't know
where it comes from or where it
is going.

We live into the mystery together.

This is the time of year when we live into this mystery by living Lent together with God.

As our hymn before the Gospel said, “We join, O Christ, Your journey these solemn forty days.”

These are solemn days and not easy because these days lead to the Cross.

Our hymn concluded by saying, “Christ, keep Your cross before us till ours we daily bear, and walk with You to Calv’ry, the pain of God to share.”

Some people have had so much pain in their lives that they cannot understand why we would want to walk in this solemn way and share the pain of God.

Others perhaps have not begun to deal with their pain, and all of this Lenten focus on stripping away and getting to what is real and dealing with the pain, has no appeal or is too scary.

But in the events of Lent, particularly Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, this is where God shared our pain and gave it all for our salvation...and I’m not talking primarily about heaven, but salvation now, in all the suffering of our lives and our

world...so that we can see, and know, and tell of eternal life now...to experience the first fruits of what the fullness of life will be one day, for all of us.

When we will no longer see in the mirror dimly but see God face to face.

I think some in our church, and the Episcopal Church generally, have a hard time with Lent because of pesky doctrine that has influenced much of our traditional language about salvation, that of substitutionary atonement.

This is the idea that Jesus had to die because of my sin and yours, that we could not satisfy the debt we owe to God because of our sin and only the substitute of Jesus, like the sacrificial lamb, could satisfy God, who required that Jesus had to die for our sins.

A lot of people still believe this and probably think I'm a heretic but really, these are ideas that men came up with to explain the mystery, using the violent, unforgiving ideas of their time...ideas that persist into our time.

Maybe I can get you to come to our Good Friday service

be reframing this for you now.

Back to our hymn, “Christ, keep Your cross
before us till ours we daily bear, and walk with You to
Calv’ry, the pain of God to share.”

God/Christ died on the cross because our world is full of
scared, violent people trying to hold on to power.
It didn’t have to be that way, but it was, and thereby Jesus
shared our pain, our suffering, God came close and
lived and died as one of us to be with us, to help
us, to save us.

Because Jesus lived, and died, and rose, we have a way,
He is our way as Christians, to be united, one with
God...reconciled in that sense.

When I hear in the Eucharistic prayer that Christ’s blood
was shed for the forgiveness of sins, I always also
hear, “for the healing of the world.”

And so during Lent, we live into this great big, sometimes
painful, mystery of Love.

As we journey with Jesus to the Cross, as we share his
pain, we realize that he shares our every pain, he
makes it possible for us bear our cross without
being crushed because he carries it with us.

Amen.