

Sermon – Lent 2 – All Saints, Sunnyside

John 3:1-17

I don't have children but I have been around many, many babies and young infants. Before I was ordained I was a hospital chaplain at the Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital in Washington Heights.

One of my units was the neonatal ICU. The unit was one of the largest Neonatal ICUs in the country at 80 beds. It was nearly always at capacity and there was a constant turnover of patients. I would spend time with the families and the babies, and the wonderful dedicated staff.

The NICU was a place of transformation. The atmosphere was sometimes joyful and sometimes very sad. Everyone was transformed by their experience. Some had a deep sense of God's presence in their experience and some felt a complete absence of God's presence. There was a lot of anxiety and pain, a lot of questions and uncertainty, but also a lot of hope and joy.

I was amazed at the power of creation and faith at work in that unit. In the parents of 17 week old twins that were still born and the parents of a baby with multiple problems that came every day for a year to sit with their son and pray for his future.

One baby's journey to life resonated with me amongst the many. I first met James' mom when she was 21 weeks pregnant. She was on bed rest and was worried that her baby would come before the 24 week threshold for lifesaving medical intervention. James did arrive early at 23 weeks but he had a fighting spirit. It was incredible to witness James grow over the days and weeks as the clinical staff tended to his many needs and the family and I prayed for his continued life. His mom and dad came and sat with him for hours, day after day, and week after week.

James had been delivered from his watery world into the caring presence of his family and the clinical care team. He had left his mother's body and was now out on his own. He had been transformed as he had been delivered into the world. So much about James' life was unknown and uncertain. It was an hour-by-hour watch to see if he would survive.

We have all been through the same journey into life. Maybe not with the same intensity and uncertainty as James but we have all been born of our mothers. We have all grown to be where we are today through the care of our parents, grand parents or someone else that cared for and nurtured us. We have learnt to exist in the world through instruction and education and through our creative self-development. We are who we are because of all these influences and through God's grace.

Nicodemus was who he was because of the many influences that existed in his life including his faith in God. He had been born, raised and educated in the culture and religion of his family and he was now a leader. We also see in Nicodemus a man with a

curiosity for what was happening in the world around him and an enquiring mind and a courageous heart.

Nicodemus had witnessed Jesus ministering in the city in which he lived. He was aware John tells us of Jesus' miraculous acts and wisdom, which he credited as being from God. He could see that Jesus was different. The curiosity that Nicodemus felt took him out of his comfort zone and caused him to seek out Jesus in the dead of night. Perhaps he did this out of fear that his community would see him meeting this threatening, prophetic figure, who was encouraging people to transform their lives.

In this dead of night meeting, Nicodemus labels Jesus a "teacher who has come from God." Clearly he sees a man who is different from others. Jesus offers a response that perplexes Nicodemus. To see the kingdom of God a person has to be "born from above." Poor old Nicodemus, like many of us, can't seem to get his head around such a mysterious response. He knows physical birth, he may have even witnessed it, but to be "born from above", to be "born of water and the spirit" was altogether perplexing. "How can this be" he exclaims.

It would not be uncommon for us to feel perplexed by the work of God in the world and in our lives. Many of the families of my patients felt perplexed wondering why God was putting them and their child through such a difficult time.

Nicodemus was raised in a world full of rules and regulations. Everything that he did of consequence was governed by the Law and by its regulations. If a situation arose that was challenging they would ask the Rabbi for an interpretation. The Law and regulations were to provide certainty for the religious community. We too have generally been raised in a culture of rules and regulations, whether written or cultural.

However, this type of upbringing causes us to be literal, linear thinkers. Young James, who was born small and fragile, had to endure the onslaught of outside forces pressing in on him so as to support his life. We too have grown knowing the onslaught of outside forces, of rules and regulations and how they have shaped our lives. Our developed thought patterns and family dynamics can box us in so that we can't experience the freedom of the spirit and the kingdom of God as God intended.

If we can be curious like Nicodemus then we too can shift our lives so as to be born from above. It is God's desire for us to be born in the spirit. Indeed it is Jesus' invitation to new birth that allows us to be open and to cultivate our imagination and our hearts to reconsider our relationship with God. Birth as I said is a transformation and rebirth is a transformation of significance in our lives. God's gift to us all is the invitation to be born again into a new life, with God at the center and surrounded by the Holy Spirit.

For many of us this transformation journey requires us to unlearn many of the things we have taken for granted in our lives. We might need to unlearn family patterns of behavior, cultural norms or personal biases. Our faith may be based on what our childhood religious leaders taught us, or what our parents or grandparents taught us, which is quite

often what their parents taught them. So how do we now find new birth for ourselves such that we are transformed to live into a deeper, more open and loving relationship with our creator.

Well we find new birth by opening our hearts up to God in prayer. We find new birth by moving away from compartmentalizing our faith such that we only practice it on Sundays or in private. We find new birth asking Jesus to help us to make the transition to being fully engaged in our faith in Jesus.

Jesus encouraged Nicodemus to see that it was his time to be reborn and to push through a new birth canal, to leave the warmth and security of the past and move into a new day and a new relationship with God. We just have to be willing to let go and invite God in.

During this season of Lent we spend time reflecting on our relationship with God. Today we hear how Nicodemus was invited by Jesus to go deeper in his life and to see the possibilities of being born into a new life of faith. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but may have eternal life.” So goes this famous verse from John 3:16. The less well-known couplet gives us hope that God continues calls us to new life. “Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order for the world might be saved through him.”

God’s saving power comes from us saying Yes and accepting the invitation to be born of water and spirit into a new life in Jesus.