

March 12, 2017 – Second Sunday of Lent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 3:1-17, Genesis 12:1-4, Psalm 121

Over the Hill

It's good having children so active in worship: coming up for the Children's Sermon, Girl Scouts reading the lessons today, and then a gospel reading given dramatic voice by two Confirmation students—who are not really children, but young men—or, getting to be young men, but still fresh faced, smooth cheeked. I bring this up because that's not how Jesus and Nicodemus are typically pictured. Paintings of Jesus usually show him with a beard. Same with Nicodemus. But who is Nicodemus, anyway? He's not a Bible character that gets mentioned all that much, he's only in the gospel of John, and even there he's mostly in just one scene, today's story. Interestingly enough, while Nicodemus may not be all that well-known, the story he's in has probably the most well-known verse in the Bible: John 3:16, "For God so loved the world..." You can find that verse in today's gospel, and you can find pictures of this gospel story, too, paintings that depict that dramatic conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. In all the pictures that I have seen, Nicodemus has facial hair, and in almost of them, his beard is white.

That's because Nicodemus is old—or so interpretative history has said. After all, for today's readings his story is paired with the story of 75 year old Abram, and while Nicodemus's age isn't specified, there are details that seem to suggest that he isn't a young man. Both the narrator and Jesus tell us that Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel, a Pharisee, a leader of Jews. These designations mean that Nicodemus is deeply versed in the scriptures, he knew his Bible, and he was a diligent observer of how God wants people to live. Being a faithful leader like that took years of study and life experience—it was not something one acquired overnight. Nicodemus himself says that he's no spring chicken: he asks Jesus how one can be born again after having grown old—a comment we assume is self-referential. And pressing the point even farther, Nicodemus repeats the question, rephrases it, by painting a picture with words. It's something of an off-putting picture that Nicodemus paints, asking, "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb?"

It's hard to know if Nicodemus is being incredulous here, or ironic. (Ironic being the dramatic choice made by our young Nicodemus today; that young man has a thing for irony). Or maybe Nicodemus is a stock character, the "cranky old man." Maybe his crankiness is accentuated because of lack of sleep. We might be sympathetic to this, after losing an hour last night. Something that happened last weekend reminded me of Nicodemus, my dad, who is 72, came to visit. (I'm not mentioning my dad as an example of crankiness, he's pretty mild-mannered, though, like all of us, he has his moments.) I mention my dad's visit because, as you do with guests, in the morning I asked him, "How'd you sleep?" My dad said, "Well, I go to bed, and then in the middle of the night I wake up. I lay there. I go the bathroom. I go back to bed, try to fall asleep, sometimes I wake up again... It's how it is at my age." Maybe this is what happened to Nicodemus. It's late at night, and he can't sleep. Maybe he lays there for a while, gets up, goes back to bed, but he can't fall asleep. So he decides to talk to Jesus.

And Jesus is awake too. To use the words of Psalm 121: The Lord neither slumbers nor sleeps... The Lord keeps watch with Nicodemus, listens to what he has to say. This night time conversation is also a story of prayer. The conversation follows a progression. Nicodemus has three lines, or three times at which he has something to say, each a distinct stage of conversation

with God. Nicodemus begins with a pronouncement, he's a learned man, after all, so his first line is almost more of a presentation, him stating what he knows. Sometimes prayers start like that: This is how it is God. Jesus's response to this seems to throw Nicodemus for a loop, for what he says next gets a little shorter, shifts to the incredulous, or ironic, becomes questions—that can be where prayers head next; that's a good place for prayers to go next, to questions, even questions that sound a little cranky. Really God? And then Jesus responds again, giving Nicodemus even more to think about, and so it is that the last thing Nicodemus says is his shortest line of all, "How can this be?" as if he is utterly undone, or overtaken by wonder, perhaps the purest, highest form of prayer. From statement and self-assertion, to questions wrestling with being, to awe of the one with whom we speak...

And the rest is all Jesus, as the dramatic reading helped show: Did you see it? Did you hear that ironic shift that takes place in who is the teacher of Israel? The rest is all Jesus, describing how he will be lifted up, explaining how God so loves the world, announcing that God's love comes not as condemnation, but salvation, for all the world, for people of every age.

The author, educator, and activist Parker Palmer recently wrote a reflection on the occasion of his 78th birthday, he was looking back on what he has learned. Palmer describes a meeting he had with a group of young adults, he said all of them were less than half his age. Palmer listened as they described how the world looks from where they stand. He said to them, "I feel like I'm standing somewhere down the curvature of the earth, while you're close to the top of that curve, looking at a horizon I can't see. But I need to know what you're seeing. Whatever's on that horizon is coming at me, as well. So please, let me know what you see, and when you do, please speak loudly and clearly!" Palmer then says, to those who are older, "Next time you think, 'I'm over the hill!' say to yourself, 'Nah, I'm just standing farther down the curvature of the earth!'"

I don't think you need to be 78 to feel over the hill. I feel that way when I hold a TV remote—which I promptly give to my kids: "Here: do this for me." I don't think you need to have a single gray hair to feel that there are things happening, coming at us, that we can't see, can't understand. This is a feeling, this our experience, both young and old. Nor is crankiness reserved for a certain age, or gender. You want to see a 3 year old fall apart? Place her in a new environment and expect her to act according to conventions of which she is unaware and has not been taught. She will be cranky. You and I would be cranky. So often we are.

And we get the same invitation that Nicodemus did, that the whole world does—not a one of us a stock character, every one of us given the same invitation: to look up to someone who sees the whole horizon, someone who is on the very top of a hill called Calvary, up on the very top of the earth, lifted up upon the cross. On that Good Friday, in the middle of the day, when Jesus was lifted up, Nicodemus was there. He's mentioned again at the very end of John's gospel, there at the cross. Was Nicodemus old? He was the right age to be born anew, as are our children, as are we.