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St. John's Episcopal Church
Lent II

NICODEMUS: LOST IN TRANSLATION

Some biblical scholars assert that Jesus spoke a Galilean version of Aramaic. They believe that the first "Life of Jesus" was an oral tradition passed on in Hebrew. Then came a literal Greek translation of that oral tradition, followed by an "anthological" Greek translation, succeeded by the first Greek reconstruction. Then the Greek was later translated into Latin. Eventually, we come to the text in front of us.

I mention this because it helps keep a balanced theological perspective, especially when reading John's gospel. What Jesus actually said can be lost in translations. Watching various news correspondents attempting to report on the catastrophe in Japan is a reminder of how difficult it is to interpret culture and translate language.

Matthew, Mark and Luke (the Synoptic Gospels) are closer than John to the historical Jesus. Each of the four gospels bears the unique imprimatur of a particular faith community with a specific history and a particular writer who produced it. If the esteemed editor of our Parish Newsletter, Gaile Binzen, and I go to the same event or interview the same person, we will write different articles; likewise with two artists drawing and painting the same subject.

So we have four quite different (canonical) renderings of the life of Jesus. This means that being absolutely certain about anything is difficult. Perhaps it is faith and not certainty that is the goal. With four different representations of Jesus we have a rich array of perspectives. Four gold mines instead of one. Who among us has just one specific, unchanging nature? We are all multi-sided. We cannot be put in a box. Neither can Jesus.

In today's gospel story of the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, one should approach the text with a different lens. John's Gospel is richly layered with symbolic language that often has more than one meaning. Nicodemus comes in the "night". For John, "night" represents ignorance, evil, a darkness that opposes the light of Christ.

Jesus says to him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." The Greek word, *anōthen*, has several meanings, including from "above" and "anew". English translators of the Greek have added one more questionable translation, "born again", which has become a slogan that carries religious, political and social baggage. What is lost is the ambiguity of the Greek.

Somewhat unfairly, Nicodemus' follow-up questions make him look rather dense. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" (There is no such thing as a bad question☺) If we hold the original ambiguity and multi-valence of the Greek word, *anōthen*, however, Nicodemus' confusion seems understandable. He might be thinking, "What is it you are saying, Jesus, "born anew", "born from above", "born again"?" The loss of rich ambiguity in this and other terms has led to a sharp division in Christianity.

What do you know of being born anew? Do you understand that question to refer to being born again once-and-for-all... and that settles it? Or, do you see rebirth as something that is happening all the time, even each day? Each moment?

There is a sharp division between those who seek literal certitude in scripture and those who are open to a range of meaning. The fundamentalist tendency is present in other religions too, certainly in Islam and Judaism. If you are like me, there is a part of you that likes to lock things down and get to closure. There is passing comfort and satisfaction in that. I might even feel secure in my enclosure. But soon I am looking through bars. A caution to "liberals" (I include myself): the rigidity of fundamentalism is not limited to biblical literalists. Progressive Christians can also become fixed and hardened in their feelings and opinions.

Why is this important now? Because we live in a deeply divided culture and historical period. Red states, blue states, etc. Embracing ambiguity can lead to a more harmonious union. I have been struck by the *non*-dogmatic nature of the "Arab Spring", the protests by young Arabs throughout the Middle East. Surprisingly, on one level, theirs is not an ideologically based uprising. It is not about radical Islam so much as young people thirsting for liberation from tyranny.

John's gospel has a number of dangerous potholes, including language that has been used historically to plant seeds of anti-Semitism. This horrific legacy comes from John's repeated insinuations and allegations against the Jews. In today's gospel, using the plural form of "you", Jesus says to Nicodemus, "yet *you* (Jews) do not receive our testimony." Recently, Pope Benedict rescinded an ancient accusation that the Jews had killed Jesus.

The writer of John's gospel appears to have been deeply influenced by Greek dualism and Gnosticism. Both these ways of viewing the world divided it into opposites: good and evil, light and darkness, ignorance and enlightenment, etc. You were either inside or outside. It is seductive to think of oneself as an "insider" whether in financial, political, social or religious realms. I imagine that each of us, especially when anxious, longs for an insider's certainty, and may ransom much in clinging to it. Awaiting the results of an important medical test, we want to know if it's negative or positive, and we want to know as soon as possible. Increased precision is not necessarily helpful. Results frequently do not provide us with the clarity we long for. Even science is ambiguous.

Considering all four gospels, I sense Jesus was not offering certitude about anything. Nor was he buying into insider-outsider dualism. He was not interested in membership in a theological country club. His compassion for the poor and the outcaste broke down divisions and transcended unyielding categories. I believe that is still his mission today.

A good way to approach John's gospel, I believe, is *not* as a Christian constitution, but as a great tapestry of mysticism, rich symbols and mystery. Happily, John's Jesus also provides us with a way out of the restricting bars and boxes.

Jesus speaks of the Spirit. The Spirit has no gender. It is neither male or female. The Greek for "spirit", *pneuma*, also means "breath" and "wind". Here is another richly nuanced word with layers of meaning. Jesus says to Nicodemus the night-truth-seeker, "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.” Wind, Spirit, the breath of God, our own breathing souls are all caught up here.

I look out my window and see the red-budding branches of a maple moving, but don't see anything making them move. I hear the wind chimes and hear the wonderful sound of pine boughs. I see the white under-wings of a hawk gliding. Nothing is visible here, but there is a great force at work. We know the presence of the wind by these manifestations. Likewise, the Spirit of God is not visible. We know its power through manifestations: healing, transformation, renewal, reconciliation, compassion and generosity. We know God's love even through our own breath, a blessing of life and link to the eternal.

We recognize today the action of the Spirit in Japan. To quote some friends, “Our hearts are so heavy for the Japanese people--their courage and grace and civility under the most extreme conditions is a miracle to behold.”

Indeed, a miracle. We see manifestations of the Spirit in the people of Japan and from nations around the world through outpourings of prayer, and human, medical and material resources. More specifically, we witness self-sacrificing love in the commitment of the workers at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. From John's Gospel; “Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”

It has been said that if a butterfly flaps its wings in Japan the effect will be felt around the world. There is a theoretical basis in physics for this that explains also why a wave that started off the coast of Japan can release its power on a beach in California. But the truth of this poetic saying is more about the Spirit that breathes over all human beings and unites us in mystery, beauty and compassion.

How did Nicodemus feel after he left Jesus? What changed for him in this encounter with holiness? I imagine that as he walked home in the darkness a dim light was growing in the East even as a gentle wind was rising and smoothing the furrows in his brow.

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The 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.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly

things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“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. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.