

Lent II, March 8, 2020

Sermon by The Rev. Canon Anna Carmichael, PhD

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So this morning Deacon Steve said to me "it's John 3:16 day" and I think I stared blankly at him. "You know," he said, "our address--316--and we're St John's." And gave me a big Deacon Steve smile. So I owe the deacon an apology for not getting it at first...it's the time change.

Every time I read John 3:1-17 two things come up for me (and this will surely prove to you that I grew up in the southeast).

The first thing that comes to mind is John 3:16...not the actual scripture passage, just the image of "John 3:16" on a poster board being held up at sporting events...primarily wrestling and monster truck rallies. For a long time I thought that perhaps John was the name of one of the wrestlers or truck drivers and that 3:16 was his birthday or some other important date in his life. Then when someone told me John 3:16 was from the Bible I wondered...what could the Bible possibly have to do with Hulk Hogan or the giant truck known as "Gravedigger"? Was there some kind of biblical reference to headlocks that I was unaware of? When I found out what John

3:16 actually said “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life” I became really confused. What on earth does this piece of scripture have to do with the fine art of professional, televised wrestling, and the roar of engines at the coliseum? To tell you the truth, I still don’t know...if you know, please, please tell me on your way out today so that I can stop losing sleep over this issue.

The other thing that this reading makes me think of is my short time attending a Pentecostal Holiness church. To be “born in the spirit” was a somewhat regular event in this tradition. At any time that you felt that you needed to give yourself to God--again--you could come forward to the railing and kneel down. The pastor or an elder in the church would come over and lay hands on you, you would confess how you needed to turn your life back to Jesus, and boom---you were born in the spirit. Even as a teenager I must have been an Episcopalian in the making because this just somehow didn’t sit right with me. It was a little too rowdy, a little too loud and a little too public.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I think I’m like Nicodemus from

the Gospel. I don't quite get all that Jesus is trying to teach me, and I ask a lot of questions. So what do we know about Nicodemus?

He shows up three times in the Gospel of John. The account from chapter 3 is the first time he comes on the scene, and then we'll see him again in chapter 7 when he will intercede on Jesus's behalf with the other Pharisees, and then finally in chapter 19 when he and Joseph of Arimathea come with spices to prepare Jesus's body for burial.

We also know that he is a Pharisee, which means he is a teacher of the torah, and he is a member of the ruling elite, the Sanhedrin. He would have been revered by his community as someone in power and someone knowledgeable about Jewish law and customs. And yet, he is curious about Jesus. He has obviously observed some of the healings Jesus has performed, and perhaps he heard him speak to a crowd. But as a "disciple" he is on the margins...he only visits with Jesus at night, which means he hasn't made his curiosity public.

Nicodemus has successfully compartmentalized his public and private life. The Temple is public...he serves as a teacher and leader. But his curiosity

about Jesus is private.

So it made me wonder...do we compartmentalize our lives? Do we keep some things private, while other parts of our lives are very public? And that got me thinking about the way we engage on social media. What do people post on social media feeds? Pet photos, vacation adventures, family celebrations...beautiful moments. But then there's real life, right?!? We don't post pictures of struggling to pay the bills, or the fight we had with our spouse. We compartmentalize our lives. We've gotten quite good at compartmentalizing our lives because it's a way of protecting ourselves from judgment from others. It's a way of managing our world. And it convinces ourselves and others that we have it all figured out.

But what happens when our faith becomes compartmentalized? What happens when our relationship with God is only about what happens when we come through the doors on Sunday? Are we truly engaged with our faith then, or are we, like Nicodemus, on the margins as a follower of Jesus?

Please understand that this is not an indictment; this is not a guilt trip in the making. And neither is Jesus's responses to Nicodemus's questions

about being born in the Spirit. When Jesus and Nicodemus have this interesting conversation, Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to revisit his faith. He is inviting Nicodemus to really let God into his life, to be a full participant instead of just observing from the margins.

This invitation is for us too. The invitation to let God in, to become a full participant in the body of Christ, is to accept the complex, complicated life of faith that does not always fit into compartments. The invitation can be scary because it means allowing our faith to be public instead of private, to sometimes be rowdy and a little too loud. It means standing up for someone when it's easier to be quiet. It means loving the unlovable. It means being vulnerable in a world that says vulnerability is weakness. But the invitation is also wonderful because God loves us...so much that God became incarnate to be with us...fully human, sharing our joys and sorrows, our pain and our laughter.

So this morning I ask you to consider if you're ready to be born anew in the Spirit, accepting God's invitation to get to work in your life. May this Lenten season be an opportunity for you to get a little bit rowdy with Jesus.