

Lydia Neufeld Harder, March 16, 2014

“Encountering God: In our Quest for Knowledge”

John 3: 1-17

Our two year old grandson, Tobias, had begun to recognize letters and numbers. One Sunday we were with him as he visited a new church. As he looked around he saw the cross in the front of the church, a cross shaped exactly like the letter “t”. Excitedly he shouted out, “Oma, look, the letter “ t” for Tobias! “ Of course, he recognized the letter, because T always stands for Tobias, doesn’t it?

I reflected on this incident as I spent time with this familiar text in John 3. For this text is also all about misunderstanding symbols, about misplaced literalism and about confusion in understanding Jesus, the representative “sign” of God’s presence on earth. But Tobias did have the most important thing right—the symbol of the cross is meant to become a self –involving symbol, not something that we look at in a detached manner, but something that calls us into a relationship to someone whose very life climaxed in a literal cross.

During this Lenten season the larger theme that our lectionary texts are pointing to is “Encountering God.” Our text today tells the story of an encounter with the human Jesus, but tells us this story in a way that invites us into that encounter and therefore into an encounter with the divine Spirit. John, the author of this gospel,, does not allow us to stay outside, critically overhearing the conversation, but instead invites us in, to also give our own response.

John’s gospel is unique among the four gospels because it is written in a deeply symbolic matter where simple words such as light, life, darkness, water all take on greater layers of meaning. For historical scholars of the last century who viewed fact and symbol as being opposite of each other, this meant that John was the least reliable of the gospels. However, during the last decades this has changed. Scholars are realizing that there is a historical core in John’s writings that is very important for the multi-layered symbolism. They have realized that John chose a particular style of writing because it draws readers into the story and allows them to identify with the characters. This gospel is now understood as one that can be read on many levels so that the meaning is never exhausted. So let us see if the text can say something new to us today, let us open ourselves to being drawn into an encounter with God.

Today's story is filled with symbolism that invites us to wrestle with the key question: Can we humans know God? And if so, how can we gain this knowledge? The answer to this question is not given directly, but rather through a deeply ironical and ambiguous conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. But it is exactly this ambiguity that invites us as readers to bring our own ideas and experiences into the conversation and thus to help in building up the multi-layered meaning of this passage. Of course, what this means is that we also have to decide on our response, we also have to decide whether we really want to know this God as presented by John.

So let us begin by looking at the central character of Nicodemus. Generally, in the history of interpretation of this story, Nicodemus has been seen as a negative character, someone who represents those Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah, those who would not confess Jesus openly, though they had some sympathy for Jesus' teachings, those whose faith was inadequate. After all, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, who under the cover of darkness, came to talk to Jesus. He may have even been gathering information which could then be used against Jesus!

However, I at least, have trouble in seeing Nicodemus in this way. After all, he is guilty only of being "befuddled" as one commentator names it. He is confused, something, I can easily identify with. He is confused about this man Jesus and what he represents. After all, Jesus is an ordinary person, born in Nazareth, coming to preach from that province of Galilee, not known for their scholars and important rabbis! Yes, he has done some signs, but these kind of "miracle workers" are often seen in the neighbourhood, even on our TV screens today. How do we know that Jesus is more than an ordinary Rabbi? What would persuade us to believe that Jesus was more than a good and just man? When Nicodemus throws up his hands helplessly at the end of the text and says, "How can this be?" we can easily identify with his response. I have a great deal of sympathy for Nicodemus who begins his conversation with a simple acknowledgment of Jesus as a fellow Rabbi and is suddenly thrown out of his depth by Jesus who suggests that he does not even understand the basics of Old Testament knowledge, let alone the revelation that Jesus represents.

And yet, if we follow the conversation, we see that Jesus is speaking very directly to Nicodemus about the heart of his mission on earth. The text that many of us know by memory is central to that conversation:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

How is Nicodemus responding to Jesus' words? This chapter does not tell us because Nicodemus vanishes from the story while the gospel writer continues to expound on what the meaning of Jesus coming to earth was all about.

We do know a bit more about Nicodemus because he appears two more times in the gospel of John. In chapter 7: 50-52 the gospel writer identifies Nicodemus as "the one who had gone to Jesus before". In this story Nicodemus appeals to the law of Moses to defend Jesus before his fellow Pharisees in the Sanhedrin, who declare Jesus guilty and dangerous. He asks, *"Does our law judge a person guilty without giving him a hearing and learning what he does?"* The fellow Pharisees immediately taunt him and ask, *"Are you also a Galilean?"*, that is, do you also follow this Galilean, this Jesus? *"Search in the law and you will find that no prophet is to arise from Galilee."* We do not have Nicodemus' response, but we see a man who is continuing to search for the truth, testing it against the law of Moses, becoming braver and taking more risks as he defends Jesus in front of his fellow Pharisees.

In John 19: 39-42 Nicodemus again appears in the story. Here he takes even greater risks. He aligns himself publically with Jesus by joining Joseph of Arimathea in removing Jesus' body from the cross and burying him with an enormous outlay of spices. Again the gospel writer reminds us that this is the same Nicodemus who first came to Jesus by night.

Nicodemus was probably a prominent member of the early Christian community out of which the gospel of John originated. By naming him 3 times we see someone who originally was confused and befuddled, but one who becomes more and more vulnerable as he moves closer to seeing Jesus for who he is.

What is most surprising is that he begins to openly sides with Jesus at a time when Jesus seems to be a total failure, when Jesus is dead, on a cross just like an ordinary criminal. What we see is a person on a journey toward faith, slowly beginning to recognize the deeper meaning of Jesus' life and finally aligning himself completely with the way of Jesus despite the risk to himself.

But let us return to the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in chapter 3 of John.

Nicodemus begins the conversation respectfully and somewhat confidently with the words, “No-one can do the signs you do unless God is with him.” This statement implies that Nicodemus has carefully studied and reflected on this Jesus and decided at least tentatively, “Yes, he must be of God because of the signs he can do”. It almost sounds like a compliment. Jesus’ response, “No-one can see the reign of God unless he is born anew” shifts the conversation in a new direction. Instead of Nicodemus judging whether Jesus was the One promised by God, Nicodemus is the one who is being judged as to whether or not he is capable of seeing the signs of the reign of God. This ironic twist puts Nicodemus on the defensive. With a touch of humour he counters, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus had invited Nicodemus to move into the symbolism of birth with its multi layered interpretation; Instead Nicodemus moves into the literalism of natural birth perhaps thinking thereby to avoid the deeper implication of Jesus’ words. But Jesus immediately clears up this misunderstanding by clarifying that there are two births, one of water and one of spirit.

It was a common term in the literature of the time to speak of the “waters of birth” when speaking of the baby coming forth from the womb after the mother’s water has been broken. Nicodemus as a “child of Abraham” **by birth** is proud that he is an Israelite, someone who has the status of being one of the people of God, through the covenant of Abraham. He has gone through the waters of birth a true Israelite born to be one of the people of God. He has felt that this is sufficient to qualify him to judge all religious reality. But when Jesus points out that what is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit, Nicodemus must have realized that Jesus was stripping away all these perceived advantages of his birth. Jesus was saying that being born of God is something on a completely different level of reality.

Perhaps these words also remind him, a rabbi who knows the scriptures well, of the promise of the new covenant promised in Ezekiel (36: 25-27).

On that day (that is the day that the Messiah will usher in) I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols. I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and you will follow my statutes and ordinances.”

The promise is that when the new age arrives, the in-breaking of the new covenant will be manifest in the work of the Spirit recreating and renewing individuals as well as the whole people of God.

Thus Nicodemus is being challenged to recognize the arrival of the new covenant in the person of Jesus. He is also challenged to give up his own confident notions of how God is known and be open to the Spirit who moves where it wills. But he can only respond, “How can this be?”

The conversation began with Nicodemus recognizing Jesus as a teacher and ends with Jesus gently mocking Nicodemus as a teacher in Israel who does not understand. And from that point on Nicodemus disappears from that chapter and a longer discourse about God’s purpose in sending Jesus takes over.

John is writing his gospel many years after this incident with Nicodemus took place. He has in mind the readers who are also confused about how to know God and how to judge Jesus who died as a criminal on the cross. He reminds them that they too are so often focussed on earthy things and earthly standards of evaluation. How can the readers understand God’s purpose in sending Jesus? So he uses the story of Moses who lifted up a serpent on a pole in the wilderness where people were dying of the plague. When they looked up in faith they were healed. He suggests that Jesus when he was lifted up on the cross is also there for the healing of the nations. He was lifted up because God so loved the world-- Not only the righteous Israelite, but the whole world. And this love was most evident in his death—a death brought about by those who thought they could judge Jesus, those who saw him as a fake, those who closed their eyes so they could not see the signs pointing to God and God’s revelation through a human person from the lowly town of Galilee.

For many years, I was not able to enter this passage of scripture and hear the message that the gospel writer was trying to convey by recording the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. I couldn’t do this, because of the strident tone that had often been directed to me during tent revival meetings, charging me to become a “born again” Christian. The invitation was presented to me through an image of an angry God who needed the death of Jesus as a payment in order to be able to forgive my sins. Therefore I had to follow a formula that would make me acceptable to this God.

In my reaction to this message, I totally missed the image that is central to this passage. It is the image of a mother longing to give birth to her child. The birth image is a rich image for those of us who are

mothers but it is also a rich image for those of us who recognize the miracle of physical birth, who have ever heard a mother groaning to give birth, who know the intense pain she has to endure as she brings forth her child. This is one of the passages that uses a feminine metaphor to describe God, to enrich the metaphor that is also used in the gospel of John, God as the “abba” father. It echoes the OT verse which describes God as the “Rock who begot you, the God who gave you birth. (Deut. 32: 18.) Even the OT scriptures knew that the mystery of our spiritual beginnings in God, are too rich to be rendered by one metaphor, one formula, one way of seeing reality. The God who gave birth to us did so in pain, in the pain of the cross, when God in Jesus too cried out in anguish feeling alone and forsaken.

For me, this passage in John became alive as I recognized God as a mother giving birth, as a mother whose water has broken, who is going through the hard work of labour in order that I could live. I realized that I wanted to live, to be born of the Spirit, to be born out of the great love as shown in the cross. I wanted to enter this life in the Spirit and be born to a life that began now but would continue even when I would die physically. For I had seen the sign, the symbol of God’s great love, and in seeing the sign, I wanted to reach out to this God who so love the world.

Like Nicodemus, I had to become vulnerable as a baby, and in this vulnerability I could become enlivened by the Spirit of Jesus who is present even now. I could grow in my understanding, I could begin to speak out of my experience and could begin actions that would not always fit with what the established religion said. Even now I long to more fully enter this process of new birth, to enter the life of the Spirit so that I can more fully taste the abundant life that Jesus offers.

What I have gradually learned is that at least for me the “conversion” or new birth that John is talking about is not so much a conversion from outright evil to good but rather from a no longer viable “childhood” understanding of God to a more mature and complex understanding of the mystery of God as revealed through Jesus. John uses the dynamic term “to believe” to talk about that openness to seeing the signs of the reign of God in Jesus. For John, to believe means a fundamental openness of heart, a vulnerability that risks seeing the signs of God even when it is dangerous to do so, when it is frightening or even costly to go where the truth points. As one opens oneself to seeing and following each small sign that we recognize is of God, we begin to see more and more clearly God active in our world today, renewing and rebirthing the world with God’s love.

We were able to attend only one day of pastor's week at Conrad Grebel University College. The guest speaker was Jonathan Wilson Hartgrave, who grew up in the Bible belt of USA, graduated from Duke university in theology and who now lives in an intentional community with his family, dedicated to living the way of Jesus in that place where they feel God has placed them—a place where the struggle with poverty, with need for jobs, with racism and with drugs is common to most. He was a story teller who freely and vulnerably shared his story of moving from a fundamentalist exclusiveness to seeing God in the neighbour, no matter who they are. His stories formed a journey in which each faithful response to a sign of God led to a more risky move to go in the direction that God was leading him. It began by recognizing signs which told him that the status quo religious thought which pervaded his context was inadequate, to seeing signs of God in most unlikely people and most unlikely places. His most striking conversion story was of being in Iraq with Christian Peacemaker Teams during the "desert storm", the US invasion of Iraq. He tells of the continual bombing in the neighbourhood where he was staying by his fellow Americans, of being ordered out of the country (after all, they might be spies) and fleeing on several jeeps across the desert. There they were hit with some bombs and several of their number were severely hurt. So they had to stop at a nearby hospital hoping to somehow save one of the severely hurt. Here they received excellent care from an Iraqi doctors despite the lack of supplies and the fact that these people had also just been bombed by Americans. When the doctor was questioned as to why he would help an American, an enemy of his nation, he replied: that is just the way we do it; we must be hospitable. Jonathan tells how this became a modern Good Samaritan story in which the Muslim doctor became the sign of loving the neighbour, yes, even the enemy as himself. He credits this Muslim with his own conversion to radical hospitality of all who show up at his door.

His story became another sign to me of God at work in our world. And so we come to our own neighbourhood, our own community- MFM- - our own lives and we wonder whether God is here among us as well, performing signs and wonders. Perhaps in our focus on our problems and our challenges, we too have become blind to the signs of God working in our midst to bring about healing and hope. Perhaps we are dismissing these signs because they do not fit with our notions of who God is and how we can know God. And so we too come by night to see Jesus and ask him these questions of truth. And as we do so, we encounter a God who confronts us with truth and with love, a God who points us to the ultimate of God's love, the cross.

During this season of Lent we are challenged to look more deeply, to open ourselves with greater vulnerability to God' Spirit. For God, the labouring mother, is continuing to birth new life all around us. May the Spirit open our eyes to see the signs so that we too can be born anew each day as we follow Jesus who so fully showed us God's love in his walk on earth. Amen