

Sermon
The Second Sunday in Lent
March 5th, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: [GENESIS 12:1-4A; PSALM 121; ROMANS 4:1-5, 13-17; JOHN 3:1-17 OR MATTHEW 17:1-9](#)

When my daughter Annabel was about eight years old, she shared with me that she'd had a dream about Jesus. I asked her to tell me about it, and she said "I saw him, in a pool." I said, "What did he look like?" and she said, "He was smiling; he looked nice". Several weeks later as we chatted in the car one afternoon Annabel suddenly said, "I just wish we *knew* what Jesus looked like." I reminded her of the dream she'd had, and she said "Oh, I know, but I wish we really *knew*."

That longing for concrete and tangible knowledge runs deep in our humanity, doesn't it? The desire to know in clear, measurable, demonstrable terms that we're on the right track, that we're doing the right thing, pulls us toward formulas. It pulls us toward transactional living: a tangible "this" means a definite, predictable "that".

When Annabel described what Jesus looked like in her dream it wasn't about so much about concrete, tangible details other than that he was smiling. He looked nice: she was describing a feeling. Something intangible.

Yet, weeks after that dream and that feeling, there was that pull to “really know”, there was that pull toward the tangible.

This year our Lectionary has us mostly in Matthew’s Gospel, but some Sundays, including today, we move into John’s Gospel.

In his book “The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic”, John Shelby Spong asserts that the writer of John’s Gospel was a mystic, writing with an understanding – with the perspective – that Jesus represented a new dimension of humanity, a new insight, a new consciousness, a new way of relating to the holy.¹

John’s Gospel *is* different from Matthew, Mark and Luke. The language and imagery is deeply poetic. It lacks much of the detail that the other Gospels offer us, but it is full of mystery and the mystical.

The church, certainly the Western church, has not left a lot of room for mystery. Our society doesn’t leave a lot of room for it either. There is a constant tug – a pull – away from mystery toward the tangible and concrete.

There is that pull – toward concrete and tangible, toward transactional living – in our Gospel passage this morning. Nicodemus, the invitation to be

¹ Spong, John Shelby. The Fourth Gospel . HarperCollins Canada. Kindle Edition.

born anew, and that famous verse “God so loved the world...” – in all of this there is a tug toward turning this into formula, but in doing that, we distort it.

If we make this passage into a formula to be born anew, or saved, or about organizing the world into categories of believers and non-believers, saved and condemned we change it. We miss the mystery. We change it from Gospel – the Good News of God’s love – into the “anti-Gospel” – a message of exclusion and condemnation. This passage – and indeed the whole of John’s Gospel – is an invitation into a mystical perspective. It’s about a way of seeing and being in the world that isn’t about formulas. It’s about a level of consciousness. It’s about transformation instead of transaction.

Cynthia Bourgeault – Episcopal priest, writer and modern day mystic – makes the case that Jesus isn’t *just* the Saviour of the world: here to die and be raised to new life for us, as we’ve primarily come to emphasize in Western Christianity. Jesus is also a wisdom teacher – one sent to dwell among us to perk our consciousness that we might come to know how to live. One sent to dwell among us so that we might know how to pattern our lives and how to enter into a new mode of perception.

Bourgeault sees Jesus's questions to Nicodemus as a classic strategy of a wisdom teacher: intended to destabilize, intended to short-circuit that grasping, comparing, formulaic way of thinking and to open up a whole new mode of perception that is not about *what* we see but about *how* we see, and how our mind makes connections. She points out that while Nicodemus is initially confused – asking “How can this be?” when Jesus speaks of being born anew – something takes root, something begins to ferment – in him. Later in John's Gospel, Nicodemus stands up for Jesus in a dispute with the Pharisees and then he comes forward to help with the burial of Jesus's body after the crucifixion.

Jesus is inviting Nicodemus, and he is inviting us into another dimension, another perspective, another realm. This is expressed vividly in Eugene Peterson's translation of this passage in *The Message*:

Jesus said, “You're not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. When you look at a baby, it's just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can't see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.”

The invisible moving the visible. Nicodemus's encounter with Jesus was transformative: it changed him, and it changed his perspective. It lifted him out of formula into an awareness of the invisible moving the visible, into a different way of seeing and being in the world. It's an invitation to us into this as well. It's an invitation to us into a new mode of perception that is not about *what* we see but about *how* we see.

This is all well and good, you might be thinking, but how am I supposed to do this? As I've been saying, it's not about a formula. It's not about a checklist. What is the way that leads us to transformation, that changes us and our perspective, then? It's a way of being in the world that doesn't discount the feeling Annabel had in her dream, and rush to find the tangible and concrete. It's a way where we make time and space in ourselves and in our encounters for the invisible moving the visible. It's a way that has us willing to pause in mystery – in the intangible – even if that mystery and intangibility looks and feels like darkness.

I'd like to share with you a "breath prayer" that I find helps me to embrace the mystery, to trust in God's grace at work in the invisible and intangible. It is a practice I took from Bruce Epperly. Each time he goes to engage or interact with anyone – through a phone call, text, email or meeting, he takes a purposeful and intentional breath: saying "Breathing in, I pray;

breathing out, I bless.” This is a way into the movement of the Spirit in each moment. It opens us to the holiness and the mystery in ourselves and in our actions, and in our encounters. Will you do that with me now? Breathing in, we pray; breathing out, we bless...

I pray that this Lenten season we will find time and space in ourselves and in our encounters to embrace mystery, to trust in God’s transforming grace, in Jesus name. Amen.