

March 5, 2023
Lent 2
John 3:1-21

St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Portland, OR
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Chapel of Chimes in Oakland, designed by famous architect, Julia Morgan. Looking for Benjamin's urn at Chapel of the Chimes, getting completely frustrated and finally asked a man who was leaving the building. He told his kids to wait for him and walked us - a very long way - to the place where we would eventually find our friend's urn.

Our gospel reading today describes the dynamic of confusion and trust around decisions to follow Jesus. Nicodemus was a well-trained and smart religious leader. He was smart enough to recognize that Jesus was the "teacher who has come from God."

—smart enough to seek out Jesus under the cover of night - perhaps seeking out Jesus in private when no one would see him, Or perhaps "darkness" is metaphor for Nicodemus' lack of being able to truly see

—Nicodemus seeking to know Jesus by applying a concrete and literal frame of mind: he questions how one can be *literally* born again

Jesus confuses him with an answer that cannot be understood literally; cannot be understood in the terms of this world.

—Jesus is describing a way of *knowing* God that is mystical rather than literal;

—Jesus affirms his authority as Son of God by describing a world beyond this one: "Above" "heavenly things"

—He contrasts things of this world with those that are God's world - the world we cannot know except through one who knows that world - who comes to us from that world.

—Jesus has been there (God's realm) and stood before Nicodemus inviting him to trust and follow him because Jesus knows the way.

The exchange that makes up the greater part of this gospel reading reveals the difficulty of understanding and trusting Jesus if one expects to understand literally.

—One is not "born again" literally. One is born again by water and spirit symbolically and spiritually - this rebirth is not a litmus test for membership, it is an engagement with the difficult to understand and mystical dimension of following Jesus. We have an earthly and incarnate birth, and because of Jesus, we are invited into a spiritual, "heavenly" birth.

—We do not know God's realm with the same experience and clarity of Jesus, therefore we are invited to *believe* Jesus, to trust and then to follow...

At the core of this passage is the question: what does it mean to believe Jesus?

Nicodemus wants concrete and literal understanding in order to believe Jesus. It's not clear what he left with. Jesus' response to his questions is abstract, resists concrete proof, and challenges what Nicodemus demanded in order to feel confident in knowing Jesus is the One.

The question: what does it mean to believe Jesus? is the question that we seek to answer in our Baptismal vows. As we will see in a few minutes, our baptismal vows are declarations of faith but their truth is borne out in our actions - the way we live - the words mean nothing without our behavior that makes our vows come alive.

Believing Jesus is not a "one and done" promise. Believing Jesus is engaging in a complex way of life that is at once very grounded in our human living and our material world, while also becoming more and more attuned to the presence of God's realm in our midst.

Believing in Jesus is a *way* - to believe is to engage in living according to Jesus' way - followers of Jesus (the baptized) are living as if we are a colony of heaven in this earthly life.

When we understand *belief* in Jesus as a verb rather than a noun, we begin to truly see what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus: it is not a philosophical principle that will bring you nearer to God, it is trusting that Jesus knows the way (because he's been there) and that following him will bring us there too.

As we wended our way to find our friend's urn, the man who offered to show us the way took us around and up steps that curved and seemed disconnected from any main path. We walked around fountains, and through atriums and then up another set of stairs. The way was curious and seemed to have no particular plan - it was not straight and we could not see how it would go by looking up ahead. So we kept following the gentleman who offered to show us. He had been there already and knew the way. He was kind and generous. We trusted him.

Following Jesus is a bit like our journey that day. We trust him because he knows the way. He is taking us where he has already been. At times it may seem we are lost, or the path is strange and makes no sense. Or it may feel bothersome - a shortcut must surely make more sense.

And this is really what Jesus was helping Nicodemus understand: Jesus can show us the way, we can trust him. But he will not hand out maps - literal guidelines - for the journey. What he will do is show us how to treat one another on the journey. He will teach us how to love one another; he will teach us how to forgive; he will teach us how to live in this world while participating in the building up of God's realm. We can be God's colony of heaven in this life.

As we stand together and reaffirm our baptismal vows, I invite you to notice what it is like to trust — that all we promise is possible because of Jesus the Christ.

And the promises we are able to fulfill, in whatever imperfect way, are possible because Jesus knows the way. He will show us. All we are called to do is to trust and follow him.