

Becoming Ourselves

*A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Paul J. Carling
at St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk, CT*

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT: MARCH 5, 2023

GENESIS 12:1-4a | PSALM 103:8-14 | ROMANS 4:1-5, 13-17 | JOHN 3:1-17

Lord, open our ears to hear your word and open our hearts to live your word. Amen.

One reason I'm forever curious about people is that we're such a maze of seeming contradictions: soldier and poet; physicist and mystic; saint and sinner. My father was both a starving artist and an absolute perfectionist. So, he always bought the finest oil paints, even if it meant going without life's necessities, including food. With my child's eyes big as saucers, I would watch him squeeze a mound, a tiny mound from each precious tube onto his palette, as he prepared to create his next masterpiece. The colors were magnificent; he had everything he needed to paint the perfect picture – except for faith and a lot of very hard work.

He'd start with an act of faith – that somewhere in all the possibilities of color and canvas and subject matter, there was a wonderfully unique picture waiting to be born. Then he moved on to the hard work – the sweat, the persistence, the slides into despair as he lost all sense of where it was going; and then the bursts of resurrected hope as his vision cleared again – all essential parts of incarnating that unique image the artist works to liberate from just under the canvas. As he struggled, my dad would often say to me, “You know Paul, creativity is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.”

Without realizing it, he was articulating the spark that ignited the Protestant Reformation in 16th century Europe. On one side was the traditional Catholic view that we're saved by our perspiration, our works. That's why priests sold indulgences, promises to pray the souls of loved ones out of the punishment of Purgatory, and with that practice came tremendous corruption.

On the other side were the Reformers, loosely called Protestants, quoting Paul's Letter to the Romans that we just heard, insisting we were saved – or what they called justified – not by our works, but what they called *sola fide*, only by our faith. Soon, of course, as human beings would have it, people started killing each other over these differences. Welcome to the ugly underbelly of organized religion.

Thanks be to God, along came Anglicanism. Both Catholic and Reformed, our Anglican tradition asserted that each side in this debate had part of the truth, but not all of the truth. This is how the *via media*, the “middle way” of Anglicanism, has always worked – insisting that the truth is usually found in competing answers to the same questions. In this case, we insisted on faith in Jesus, and in working to follow Christ.

Since God is bigger than any of our theological certainties, Anglicanism encourages us to think in terms of “both / and,” instead of “either / or.” That's why as Episcopalians, we're

the only denomination which refuses to be called “Protestant” or “Catholic,” because we’re both. And we insist that arriving at truth requires all of our different perspectives – imagine all the definite perspectives, right now, in this church. We stay at the table and we talk through our differences, rather than judge or condemn or kill those who disagree with us. (Well, even if we feel like it, we try not to...) [*Laughter.*]

Both “faith” and “works.” Saint Augustine put it well, whenever the priest elevated the host at the moment of consecration: “Behold what you are,” he’d say, and “become what you see.” “Behold what you are,” a beloved child of God, and “become what you see,” living out your faith through action!

In today’s Gospel we meet Nicodemus, powerful, rich, successful – a brilliant religious leader, a master teacher. With everything going for him, why was he so uptight that he came to Jesus in secret, at night? We can imagine that, just like the rest of us, he was hungry for something deeper, and again, just like the rest of us, he was afraid of what that journey might cost. Perhaps he felt as the French worker, priest, and poet, Michael Quoist did when he prayed: “I’m afraid God. I’m afraid of the one small Yes to you, that might lead to so many larger Yesses.”

In his fear, Nicodemus fell back on what he knew – his head and not his heart. Moved by Jesus’ amazing miracles, he wastes Jesus’ time by going all literal on us: “How can I be born again if I’m old? Am I supposed to crawl back into my mother’s womb?”

Nicodemus reminds me so much of us, hungering for something deeper, and relying on our heads rather than our hearts to figure out what we need. St. Augustine knew all about this, “God, you have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” We’re drawn to follow Jesus, even as we’re afraid to give up the security and comfort we now enjoy.

So, we cast about for answers; we stumble upon Jesus’ invitation – and then we have no idea what to do with it. We want to settle for a simple affirmation of faith; but deep down, we understand that Jesus also calls us to the hard work of transforming our lives and transforming the world.

That’s why Jesus says it’s not enough to be “born of water,” as in baptism. He says we must also be “born of the Holy Spirit,” which only happens when we do the hard work of faith, every day.

The hard work of opening our hearts to God’s love, and then realizing that God’s love is actually intended for every member of the human family, not just our family or friends - but our enemies, and the whole human family, equally. The hard work of forgiving ourselves and others, the hard work of reconciliation, of “...striving,” as our baptismal promise put it, “...for peace and justice among all people, and respecting the dignity of all human beings.”

Last week I felt in my gut like I had a new enemy, the legislators in Florida, who were passing their latest exclusionary law – this time against people in drag. They’re banning places that serve alcohol and dress up in something different from their “born sex.” I could have written it off as just more political theatre, as Steven Colbert did. He quipped, “Hmmm, serving wine, and men dressing up in gowns... this is very bad news for churches!”

[Laughter] But I wasn't amused, I was outraged. And so was Jesus. And that's when I realized I wasn't alone.

The good news is that the world is filled with so many allies, because in Jesus' economy there is no Greek or Jew, no male or female, Black, White or Brown, no rich or poor, Muslim or Christian, gay, transgender or straight, drag or gender-conforming in dress, refugee or "real" American. We are all God's people – one human family – with so much more in common than not, all dreaming of a world of peace, justice, and enough for all, just as you and I do.

Having faith that we all belong to each other, and then acting on that faith, was the core of Jesus' message. We're invited to accept this life-changing challenge, and then to work to make it a reality. Faith and works, creating God's beloved community here at St. Paul's, across Norwalk, and beyond.

Thankfully, God has already given us the perfect example of how to bring this about, of incarnating our faith into action. As Jesus reminds us: "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."

So, my beloved family, as we travel together through Lent, let's each commit to deepening our faith, and to re-examining how that faith informs how we live – in ways large and small; let's commit to embracing God's invitation: "Behold what you are... become what you see."