

Sunday, March 12th 2017
2nd Sunday in Lent

I often start my sermons saying:

We've just heard a very well-known passage of the Gospel

But indeed this one is very well known, right?

The one we often mentions only by its numbers: John 3:16

The secret key

The magic formula

to enter the Kingdom of God.

Genesis 12:1-4a

John 3:1-17

The Rev Fanny Belanger

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,

so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

According to a lot of Christian doctrines, that's it.

You just have to believe it, you just have to recite the formula

Accept Jesus into your life.

And boom. You're done. You have Eternal life.

You're saved.

Born again – or born from above, as the translation allows both expressions.

Yet I guess, a lot of Christians would also testify

that it isn't always *like that* – that it is not always as easy as it may seem.

I've just finished reading a very funny book

- actually, very spiritual in different ways -

by Maggie Rowe, as how she explains that as a child she could not figure this whole

Jesus's prayer thing

Accepting Jesus into your life.

And so she would harass her pastor, her Hello Kitty note pad in hand and

asks him after each Sunday service all her questions of the week:

How do you know you said the Jesus's prayer correctly?

How do you know your intention was really pure when you accepted Jesus?

What about those who have never heard about Jesus?

How would you know for sure if you were truly born again?

And so, it's a funny story - until Maggie, in her twenties,

ends up on a psychiatric ward for severe depression.

Religion can do that to people.

She wanted so much to be certain and, as her questions grew and went unanswered, she realized:

Certain,

there was no way she could

ever be.

John 3:16

Isn't it amazing how

we manage to squeeze this whole beautiful and deep chapter of John's Gospel

into a single magic formula

aimed to provide divine certainty to insecure human beings?

Well, today, we don't hear just the formula. We hear the whole story.

The story of a man named Nicodemus.

And if we pay attention to the story, we'll realize it's a story that has nothing to do with certainty.

It's a story of longing, of seeking, of questioning.

Nicodemus heads out at night
to meet with this new Rabbi in town, Jesus.
Usually teachers would study the Torah at night

- a good time for quiet, reflection, meditation.

Nicodemus indeed was a teacher, the text reads a *leader of the Jews*.
But you see, for him, being a religious man

It's not about hanging out in his synagogue, clinging to his Scriptures, chewing on
his tradition.

He does all of that of course, but he does not sit on his certitudes.
Think about that: He is a leader of the Jews and he comes to meet
Jesus, the new kid on the block

indeed, Jesus probably looked like a kid compared to him.

Nevertheless, Nicodemus is willing to learn from Jesus, because he saw something in him.
Nicodemus was a seeker, as Abraham was.

Oh maybe he did not travel that far, but he was willing to head out in the dark
looking for something
looking for a God bigger than his God.

(I think it is worth remembering that, when we hear so often people saying
they're spiritual, not religious.

Maybe they don't want to bother with religion, that's right.
But maybe the God we offer in our religions is a little too small
in a world that seem to expand in so many directions.)

Nicodemus shows us than being a believer is

about being a seeker, a questioner, somebody who does not always
sleep at night.

Somebody sized with the fear of God

Somebody sized with divine anxiety.

The strange thing, though, is that Jesus
instead of comforting Nicodemus with a set of certitudes, as you would expect,
invites Nicodemus to go even deeper.

I had a teacher at seminary who used to say that she didn't want us to stop being confused about God
She wanted us to go deeper, to be confused
at a higher level.

And Jesus, as a good teacher, gives Nicodemus something to be even more puzzled about:

No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born again.

Nicodemus is troubled, and it looks like we're confused about it too.

If we understand God needs to give us a new life
we just don't understand what giving birth is about. (Maybe
because of too much male theology).

Our doctrines generally assume it's easy, simple, an instant thing.

Boom you're born

Boom you're done.

Well, if we really take seriously the comparison between spiritual life and giving birth and pregnancy
We should be clued in

that it is long, both painful and wonderful, make you sick, make you happy,
make you grow impatient, make you ask way too many questions,
make you wonder, and make you melt down.

It has nothing, nothing to do with immediacy and certainty.

We're in God's womb.
That's the wonderful secret Jesus is disclosing to Nicodemus
in the warmth of this summer where they're probably
whispering on a front porch.
This world, the whole world, the nature all around us and in us
Is God's womb.

God is birthing us.

Calling us to existence, maturing us, literally,
Breathing air into our lungs,
giving us plants and animals to eat.
God is feeding us with God's flesh and with God's blood
God is filling us with God's spirit.
That's what all the primitive religions have always known, from the beginning.
This whole world is God's womb.
Yet as it is with the wind, we cannot see it.

We cannot see the kingdom of God, as surely as
a child inside the womb feeds on his mother, hears her voice,
maybe reacts to her touching,
but has no idea who she is and he has no idea about the life he is called to live.
But you bear a child in your womb so that one day you can hold him into your arms,
and look at him face to face
and have a real dialogue and a real relationships
As Nicodemus on this warm summer night talks with his God
face to face -
On the front porch, with Jesus, who happens to be the Word of God spoken to him.

Jesus makes God manifest into this world where we cannot see him.
into this world where God is like the wind.
Moreover, Jesus gives a face and gives a story to our story with God.
This is all there is to John's Gospel
that the light came into the world to testify to the light
God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.
Yes, God lays down God's life
But not so much a cruel sacrifice
than as a mother who gives her own body.
God endures the suffering and the pain of our birthing and creation
and mostly God endures the suffering of our redemption
because we resist so much to be birthed
because we cling so badly to the womb
to this world as we have always known it. A world of darkness and warmth,
a world of security, in our ignorance.

Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness
to bring a sign of healing to the Hebrews.
God lifts up his Son of the cross
To reveal to us God's mystery and in Jesus God says to us: This is what I do for you, from the
beginning, enduring the suffering, laying down my life so you can be birthed, in eternity, for the
face to face
after death, the day of the great delivery.

Jesus makes manifest what is true everywhere, from all eternity.
We often talk about the Gospel of John as the book of the signs
But Jesus is the sign
Jesus is the manifestation of God in the world
He is the serpent in the wilderness, he invites us to look further
to go deeper
Jesus is not another box where we can trap God with our certainties.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*
The Gospel does not say “Believe that Jesus is God
and it will happen for you that if you believe so, God will be pleased with you and will
reward you with
Eternal life.
This is not “*if you believe, you will make it happen for you*”
This is not a magic formula or a trick
It’s a story.

It’s the story of Nicodemus, of you and me and all of us.
Believe means
Believe that it has already happened for you
Believe that God loves you and lays down God’s life.
God endures the pain of our sins. Instead of destroying us because of our imperfections,
God keeps creating us and redeeming us.
And we are saved – not because God will *reward us* with Eternal life if we have a correct
understanding of Jesus,
But if we look towards Jesus we will have eyes to see Eternal life,
We will see God’s compassion for us,
this compassion in which we are birthed, created and redeemed.
This compassion Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims speak also about.
We can all experience God’s *whose glory it is to always have mercy* -
as we prayed it in our collect today.

Jesus makes it known to us God’s love in a wonderful and unique way.
It does not prevent us from walking in the dark.
But we can be aware that our spiritual struggles
are the natural pangs of our birthing
questions, uncertainty, doubts
little by little, we are led to see God face to face. It’s the story of our lives.

After this conversation, Nicodemus will go back to his life and we will see him again in John’s Gospel
at night,
defending Jesus when Jesus is accused
carrying Jesus’s body to the grave after the crucifixion.
Nicodemus
may not find all his answers but
he will learn compassion from Jesus, with Jesus. Even in times of fear and doubts, love and trust
will remain. And this is what it is to have faith.
This faith by which we will be justified, as Paul reminds us today. Amen.