

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 3:1-17  
 Genesis 12:1-4a  
 Psalm 121  
 Romans 4:1-5,13-17

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 The Second Sunday of Lent

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Growing up I had a memory book. It was one of those books that held your yearly report card. There was a log for your favorite activities, an area to attach your school photo and boxes to check with what you wanted to be when you grew up.

My career aspirations went like this:

Kindergarten – Fireman or Cowboy

1<sup>st</sup> grade – Cowboy

2<sup>nd</sup> grade – Cowboy

3<sup>rd</sup> grade – Cowboy and a piano player

4<sup>th</sup> grade – I let go of my Cowboy dreams and decided I would be a *famous* piano player

5<sup>th</sup> grade – I realized the piano plan wasn't working out so well so I went back to something I thought was more attainable...A horse trainer.

Now...can you guess what my college major was? Art History. I had plans to be a museum curator for early American craft and design.

And...nowhere on my list of career choices did I ever check the box to be an Episcopal Priest.

To be sure, my love of horses never went away. You can still find me most days hanging out at a barn but who I am today is layered with a lot of trial and error, hopes and dreams, successes and failures. I may have wanted to be a cowboy but God clearly had other plans.

It makes me think about the journey we find Nicodemus on in our Gospel text. Nicodemus is a man deeply rooted in his Jewish context. He was a leader, a Pharisee of high standing. He had a specific identity that grounded him in his society. He knew who he was.

And yet, we find him coming to Jesus at night, full of questions about what he is hearing and seeing. What he thought he knew about the world was coming into question. What he thought he knew about himself was getting turned upside down.

Jesus...What does it mean to be born from above? What does it mean that the wind is going to blow and I am not going to know where it is coming from? *How can these things be? I don't understand!*

I get it. All of the questions Nicodemus asked – I have asked as well. Because all of this talk about being born again means that something within me is going to have to change. It means

that Jesus is calling me to reconsider what I've been up to and where I might have become closed off to a greater calling.

I imagine Nicodemus saying to Jesus...I don't want the wind to blow me in a new direction. I already have things figured out. I like my life just as it is. I have a certain amount of responsibility. I have public standing. I have built a life that affords me security and comfort. And this talk of change is confusing and unsettling.

And I love that Nicodemus doesn't run from that uncertainty. Instead...he keeps asking questions. He wrestles with what this new life might mean for him. He is trying to be open and receptive to hearing God's answer.

Theologian Brian McClaren tells this story...

At the end of his fourth grade year, he had the opportunity to sign up to be on the safety patrol when he started 5<sup>th</sup> grade. These were the big kids who helped the little kids cross the street every day. It was a big deal. Regarding his decision to sign up he said...

*"I was thinking of four things. First, I was thinking I would get to wear a special white belt with an actual silver badge. Wow! Second, I was thinking about how I could boss other kids around! Double wow! Third, I was thinking of the fact that they could arrive at school late and leave early. Triple Wow! And fourth, I was thinking of the fact that safety patrols all went to an amusement park on a school day at the end of the year....That was a home run of wows!"<sup>1</sup>*

McClaren's chosen identity as a safety patrol was summed up by the advantages it could give him. He could have accolades, authority, autonomy, and privilege.

What he didn't think about was the hard work and sacrifice that went into the job. He didn't think about the responsibility of caring for others or the training that would be required of him. His fourth-grade self just wanted the fame and recognition...not the sacrifice or service that went into it. (My fourth-grade self wanted the same thing...remember that dream of being a famous piano player?)

But God calls us to something so much more. God calls us to take our gifts and be of service to the world. In Genesis, God tells Abram that he will be blessed. His name will be great. But that blessing and that greatness have a much bigger purpose than his individual fulfillment, safety or comfort. God says...I give you these things so that you may go out and be a blessing to others...to everyone on this earth.

That's the central teaching of Jesus in our Gospel this morning. To be born again into the love of Christ for all people. To be a blessing to all of God's beloved. And sometimes to do that we have

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<sup>1</sup> [https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-d85?publication\\_id=47400&post\\_id=188626213&isFreemail=false&r=2v2tij&triedRedirect=true](https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-d85?publication_id=47400&post_id=188626213&isFreemail=false&r=2v2tij&triedRedirect=true)

to reevaluate some of our choices. At times, we have to start over. It doesn't mean we leave all the things we love behind. But it does mean that we must begin looking beyond ourselves to seek a more impactful way to love and serve one another for the greater good of all of creation.

As Brian McClaren concludes his essay...

"Jesus keeps challenging [Nicodemus] to break out of his fourth-grade thinking, and join him as a safety patrol, so to speak, who isn't working for himself alone, or even for his own little group or clique, but who is concerned for everyone's welfare, everywhere, no exceptions."

That's Nicodemus' journey and that's our journey – to know that our lives are kept in God's loving care so that we can be a blessing to others. It's a journey that won't always make logical sense (cowboys don't often become Episcopal priests) but it's a journey that speaks to something much deeper than our human reason.

So when we ask like Nicodemus, Lord, how can these things be, we ask with an open heart ready to receive the answers.