

Lent 2 A
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There is one for fear of mice, there are two for clowns, eight for midwives and many more for travelers. What are they? "Patron Saints." In the Roman Catholic tradition there are more than 10,000 people who have been named as saints, and most of them have a particular association with a cause, a country or a way of life. A patron saint is one who has a special affinity for that group and its members. Last night I was looking for help from the patron saint of sermon writing, but there doesn't appear to be one...☺

As a life long Lutheran, I do not have much experience with the saints. It wasn't until I came here, to Holy Trinity, that I became familiar with icons and the practice of including named saints in our shared prayers. So I've come to have an appreciation for the saints, being connected to the people of faith who have gone before us and have much to teach us and share with us in our journey of faith.

Patricia Farris, a Methodist minister in California, proposes the idea that Nicodemus could be the Patron Saint of Seekers. She says, "Usually Nicodemus gets a bad rap," and is portrayed "as one who is too dimwitted to understand about being born again." But, she says, "Jesus receives Nicodemus as a pilgrim, a sincere religious seeker. Jesus welcomes him and his searching mind. Jesus senses that he is a learned Pharisee, this member of the religious establishment--Judge Nicodemus, His Honor Nicodemus--is responding to something in Jesus' teaching. He seems to know that Nicodemus is willing to risk leaving behind the truth as he has known it in order to explore something new." And in the midst of his seeking and searching, Jesus offers him new life.

In a way, isn't that what we are all seeking? New life? Maybe not a *brand new* life in the literal sense, climbing back into our mother's womb and being born again. But a new life that is transformed and filled with meaning and purpose, with a connection to the holy and hopefulness for the future? This is the kind of life that is offered to Nicodemus in the middle of the night as he comes to Jesus seeking answers to life's burning questions.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born from above. Often this is translated as born again, but I'd like us to think about it in a third sense....to be born anew. I didn't do well as a Greek student in seminary. But every now and then it is interesting to me to learn something from those who do study the language and know its nuances well. The word *anōthen* can be used in a variety of ways in Greek. It can mean *above* (or from God) and it can mean *again* (as in born again).

Jesus directs Nicodemus to receive a new birth in God, to have his life transformed by God's spirit and presence. But Nicodemus hears it as something he must do, "go back into his mother's womb and be born again" However both the grammar and the imagery of birth indicate that it is something God does for us. Just as we were passive recipients of our first births, so are we passive recipients of this birth from above. God is making all things new and inviting us into a new birth.

Marcus Borg, author of The Heart of Christianity, writes about being born again and what that might mean for postmodern thinkers and believers. "Being born again is the work of the Spirit. Whether it happens suddenly or gradually, we can't make it happen...but we *can* be intentional about it. Though we can't make it happen, we can midwife the process. This is the purpose of spirituality: to help birth the new self and nourish the new life. Spirituality is midwifery. As people who are seeking a deeper spirituality we are developing a relationship that already exists. God has been in relationship with us since our birth, spirituality is about becoming more aware of and present to that relationship. Paying attention to our relationship with God through prayer and meditation, participating in a community that sings, prays and eats together, and sharing in a common witness of compassion and justice will strengthen and sustain it for the long journey of renewed life.

Borg, like Martin Luther, says we experience being “born again” every day when we remember our baptism, and start each day renewed in the promised of new life .

I don't know about you, but I need this daily reminder when I start my day listening to the news or reading the daily newspaper. Whether it be news from the Congo or Kenya, another suicide bomber in Iraq or Afghanistan, a shooting in a Layne Bryant store or a university lecture hall, a worrisome report from the doctor or any other worry or fear. Daily, we're well aware of the evil and heartache that surround us.

And daily, like Nicodemus, we search for answers and search for God.

And this day, surrounded by this community, God finds us once again. In the wine and bread, in the word and the promise born of water. This is where we tend the faith that Nicodemus longed for. Spirituality is all about the process of being born again and again and again. It is the heart of the Christian life. It is a central purpose of our life together: that we as the church midwife and nourish this process of being born again in one another.

Thanks be to God for nourishing our faith in this place, within this community and meal. And thanks be to God for Nicodemus, patron saint of seekers. May he protect the seeker in each of us, guiding us to a renewed life in the reign of God. May he place us in the company of those who would teach us that love, compassion and hope define us and carry us to a new day. Every day.