

*Walking with Jesus ... when You're Short on Imagination*

March 20, 2011 Lent 2A

John 3:1-17

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How many of you have imagination? I used to, up until about age 10. I remember reading the Lone Ranger books when I was a boy. Let me tell you, I didn't just read *about* the Lone Ranger. I *was* the Lone Ranger. I was the one riding my trusty horse, Silver. Right beside me was my loyal companion, Tonto. I wore a mask to conceal my identity. I had a six-shooter in each hand and enough silver bullets for all the bad guys in Texas. [my rendition of the William Tell Overture] *Hi-yo Silver, away!*

Like I said, I used to have imagination. Then somewhere along the way I started growing up. I got a job. I had to think about college. I began noticing girls, who—to be perfectly honest—weren't all that keen on a teenaged boy who referred to himself as the “Masked Man.” All of a sudden I didn't have time for imagination—that was kid stuff. I was becoming a grown-up. And for grown-ups, life was serious.

Nicodemus doesn't have much imagination either, at least not that I can tell. He's all grown up, a respected religious leader, a member of the esteemed Sanhedrin—the highest authority in the land. Nicodemus has a reputation to worry about. So why in the world he sneaks off to visit Jesus in the middle of the night, we'll never know. Perhaps he's heard some things about Jesus—good teacher, amazing healer, a bit of a rock star. He's heard enough, in fact, that he's convinced he's got Jesus all figured out. Nicodemus approaches him under the cover of darkness and says, “Jesus, we *know* who you are, you're a teacher sent from God.” See what I mean by a lack of imagination? To Nicodemus, Jesus is a *teacher*, nothing more, nothing less.

The conversation continues. Like a lot of the conversations in John, it's full of twists and turns. Jesus says, “Nicodemus, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born *anohen*.” That's the Greek word, *anohen*. It's tricky because it's got a double meaning. It means either being born “all over again” or being born “from above.” Nicodemus, utterly lacking in imagination, doesn't get it. “I'm a full-grown adult,” he says, “How can I crawl back inside my mother's womb?” Duh! Jesus is talking about a spiritual birth, from heaven, but Nicodemus is stuck on earth.

Now, to be fair to old Nicodemus, I think Jesus is intentionally being elusive. Why? Not because he secretly enjoys confusing people, but as a way of trying to crack open Nicodemus' tough, guarded exterior. "Do you really think you have me all figured out, Nicodemus? Maybe there's more to me than what you can see."

Zumbro member, John Pittinger, gave his faith story at the Lenten breakfast last Wednesday. John admitted to being a little like Nicodemus for much of his life. That is, he thought he had Jesus all figured out. He understood Jesus to be a great man, a teacher, a healer, but definitely *not* God. It wasn't until John had children of his own that things began to change. He understood more clearly about the unconditional, never-ending love of a father—and particularly God as Father. John opened up in his thinking about Jesus. A light went on: "Maybe there's more to Jesus than what I can see."

Much like Nicodemus, I think, when we lose our imagination, we often become less "open" to things. A comb is a comb. It's for hair. It's not a musical instrument or a back scratcher. A stick is a stick. It's for the trash pile. It's not a magic wand or a king's scepter. The stray brown dog needs to go to the Humane Society, and not home with us, because it will cost far too much to take care of it.

Now, there's nothing wrong with a little "adult" realism. Pastor Jason talked about that in his sermon on Wednesday. He said: whenever we feel a nudge to get out of the boat and start walking on water, we have to decide if it's faith or foolishness. The problem is, we often don't know. About all we know for sure is that if we always play it safe, we're probably going to end up like Nicodemus—all closed off to something new. "I *know* who you are, Jesus. You're a teacher. And as to this business about me being born all over again, I'm doing just fine as I am, thank you very much."

Well, is it true—is Nicodemus doing just fine? Probably not. Why else would he be sneaking in the middle of the night? And how about you and me—are we doing just fine? Probably not. Why else would we lose so much sleep and worry so much and work as if everything depended on us?

"Faith," says theologian James Whitehead, "is the enduring ability to imagine life in a certain way." If Whitehead is right, then imagination in our faith life is not really an option; it's a necessity. Without imagination, I can picture Noah saying, "God, you want me to build a boat that's how big? Why don't you find somebody else?" Without

imagination, I can picture Joshua saying, “Lord, you want us to march around Jericho how many times? I think I’m busy that weekend.” Without imagination, I can picture Mary, with a knot in her stomach, saying, “I’d like to have this baby, Lord, but my parents would kill me for sure.”

Here’s my point: imagination is not just kid stuff. Adults need it too. It’s crucial if we want to see what God is up to. Without imagination, it’s as if God is simply asking folks to do foolish things—to build an ark on dry land, to march around a city wall that’s never coming down, to have a baby that doesn’t look at all like the father. But with imagination, we might just be able to see that God is up to something only God can do. Indeed, “God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” *Really, God, you would do that for the whole world? You would do that for me? Maybe there’s more to you than what I can see.*

So, let me ask, are you able to see what God is up to? It isn’t easy, is it? You have to be looking in order to see it. Remember those puzzles we used to play as children. There’d be a picture of a perfectly ordinary tree, only it had figures cleverly hidden in the middle of it. The caption would read: “How many animals can you find in this picture?” I would stare at it for hours, turning the page every which way, until I’d discovered all of them: giraffes, monkeys, lions, hippos. Those puzzles were fun. I got to look for something extraordinary in the midst of ordinary life.

As best I can tell, some of that same impulse fires our faith in God. Day after day we get up and go. Life seems perfectly ordinary. But every so often we stop long enough to look. And when we do, we might just get a glimpse of the extraordinary—the Hidden Figure—at work in the world. Even then, we see only see a part of it—a hand or a foot—but not the whole.

Seeing what God is up to takes imagination. We have to be willing to keep looking for it until we find it, or better yet, until it finds us. We have to be willing to loosen our grip—that sure sense that we *know* everything—and be open to surprise. We have to be willing to participate in God’s own imagination, because in God’s eyes, our lives and our church and our world are full of possibility and promise.

To believe like Jesus is suggesting to Nicodemus is ultimately a gift from above. We can’t crawl back inside our mother’s womb, nor do we need to. We are born anew of

water and Spirit. Taking this to heart is a leap of faith. In faith, we keep looking for the Hidden Figure at work in the world, and as we do, we keep imagining the possibilities. In faith, we imagine the poor with enough to eat. In faith, we imagine ailing bodies and spirits that are being made whole. In faith, we imagine families that are close and strong. In faith, we imagine a lost son who finds his way back home. In faith, we imagine suicide bombers laying down their weapons of mass destruction. In faith, we imagine Japan up and running again, with a worldwide outpouring of love and concern. Yes, in faith, we dare to believe that God will keep God's promises, and someday the kingdom will finally come. After all, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

By the way, somewhere along the line a little imagination must have gotten into old Nicodemus. I say this because he shows up at the end of the story. As Jesus is being taken down from the cross, Nicodemus is there to carry his lifeless body to the tomb. Somehow—by the grace of God—this cautious, tough-nut-to-crack religious leader has become a believer. And get this, he is caring for the body of his Lord, not at midnight, but in broad daylight.

Oh, may it please God to fill our hearts with such imagination, with enough imagination to see the possibilities and promise of the Jesus we've come to visit in the middle of the night, and even more, with enough imagination to let him have his way with us. Amen.