

“Believing”

Rev. Damaris D. Whittaker

John 3:1-17

Psalm 121

March 16, 2014

Let us pray...

Some time ago I was asked to officiate an interfaith wedding. The couple asked if I could perhaps select a rabbi to officiate with me, since they were not originally from the area and did not have a relationship with any local synagogue.

So, I very enthusiastically asked a couple of my friends if they would officiate with me, and one of them replied, “Damaris, I do not believe in interfaith weddings. So I do not officiate them.” He said, “I’ll explain to you later, I hope you are not offended.”

I was not offended, but just for a few minutes, I felt inconvenienced. I said, you know, “We all have to believe in something, don’t we? “ This was not even about faith – but practice.

And then, it took me just that long, a minute or two, to acknowledge, how laborious and confining my own beliefs can be, and how exhausting and perhaps conflicting they may seem to my friends from other faiths.

In the Gospel lesson this morning, Nicodemus, a religious leader, invites Jesus to his home at night. Nicodemus was part of the “power elite” of his time. At least he was an educated man at a time when most people could not read.

We are used to Jesus being approached by people with urgent needs—people who are seemingly vulnerable. But Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a different kind of need—a need for understanding.

Nicodemus may not be experiencing physical need, but his need, “hunger” as one commentary puts it “drives him to Jesus in the middle of the night, when many of us wrestle with questions and doubts, and face our deepest needs.”¹

Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a set of convictions of what is real, what is possible. He states, “We know that you are a teacher who comes from God.” *We* because, after all, he feels like he represents a group of religious leaders.

But what it seems that he knows and he believes quickly changes to disbelief and skepticism, and the “what” all of the sudden begins to transform into the “how.”

“How can anyone be born after having grown old? (4a)

“Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born? (4b)

“How can these things be? (9)

Diana Butler Bass, speaks of belief as experiential and she states,

“How is the question of meaning and purpose that pushes people into a deeper engagement in the world, rather than memorizing facts... From what to how is a shift from information *about* to experience of. *What* is a religious question, one of dogma and doctrine; *how* is an emerging question, one of experience and connection.”[2]

And so, we are confronted today—all of us, just like Nicodemus was—with the question, how can anyone be born again...or born from above?

And it is possible that our minds already have answered the question, and we have said, “Well, that is not our tradition—we are not born-again Christians.”

We have memorized the facts -- we go back to the what we are not, because we have made an association, we have come to an understanding...so we do not ask how, we state the what.

¹ Katheryn Matthews Huey

Marcus Borg speaks about believe, and he states that “believe” rather than strict intellectual assent to propositions and claims, is trust and faithfulness and “in very general sense... the believe that there is something to all of this. Further, faith that “believes God is not something that we can simply will on our own...but something we are lead to...it grows as our relationship with God deepens...but we have to take the first step and then another.”²

And so, in the age of spiritual but not religious, we are called to an experiential faith. Believing not only from our intellect but with our hearts,

“Heart comes from the latin *cor* and points not merely to our emotions but to the core of the self, that center place where all of our ways of knowing converge—intellectual, emotional, sensory, intuitive, imaginative, experiential, relational, and bodily, among others. The heart is where we integrate what we know in our minds with what we know in our bones, the place where our knowledge can become fully human.”³

There is call to *believe* this morning, good people, not only with our intellect, but also with our hearts. I dare say that there is a call to be spiritual and religious, because,

“To be spiritual and religious is to call for a new wholeness of experience and reason, to restitch experience with human wisdom and to renew reason through an experience of awe. Thus, the path of Christian faith in a post religious age must be that of experiential belief in which the heart takes the lead in believing.”⁴

I invite us to examine our beliefs, the *what* and the *how*. And, perhaps that we, too, may call on God in the midnight hour, with our questions and our assumptions and presumptions.

² Marcos Borg, *The God We Never Knew*,

³ Parker Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, pg 6

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and The Birth of New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne)

Let us come to God with what we think we know and understand. Let us acknowledge that our knowing and our believing are in need of reconciliation. Let us acknowledge the resistance we feel when we hear God's promises.

May we begin by believing, that "God so loved the world..." -- not the church, but the world. Amen.