

Whenever we go into new situations, we tend to carry with us the expectations of our past experiences, even when we know, or at least should know, that they will be very different. For example, a business traveler to Mexico got quite the shock when he experienced the hotel showers. On the faucet handles he read “H” and “C.” Past experiences told him what to expect, H for hot and C for cold. However, as he turned up the H and felt the icy blast of cold water, he realized that his expectations were misleading. The primary language in Mexico is Spanish, not English. The C on the faucet stood for “Caliente,” which means hot! The H, on the other hand, stood for “Helado”, which means cold!

We all have expectations about everything. It’s another one of those basic human defining characteristics. Expectations are based on past experiences and they color every part of our lives, even faith.

Historian Daniel Boorstin suggests that Americans suffer from all-too-extravagant expectations. In his book, *The Image*, Boorstin writes:

We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible. We expect compact cars which are spacious; luxurious cars which are economical. We expect to be rich and charitable, powerful and merciful, active and reflective, kind and competitive .... We expect to eat and stay thin, to be constantly on the move and ever more neighborly, to go to a "church of our choice" and yet feel its guiding power over us, to revere God and to be God. Never have people been more the masters of their environment. Yet never has a people felt more deceived and disappointed. For never has a people expected so much more than the world could offer.<sup>1</sup>

A study done several years ago said one of the reasons marriages fail is that men expect their wives will never change and women expect their husbands to change. At some point, both sides of these expectations fall short, and more often than not, marriages are thrust into crises.

The point is that our lives are full of expectations and preconceived notions and ideas about how things are supposed to go. And when expectations are turned upside down, everything we know about life is called into question. It’s a shocking experience, much like turning on the “H” faucet expecting hot water only to be doused with freezing, helado, water.

This is the second Sunday of Lent, a season when we prayerfully examine the dark places in our lives in order to make more room for God so that we can better love God and others, and learn to forgive ourselves. This year, instead of giving up indulgences like chocolate, I’m inviting us to give up things that come in between us and God--things that get in the way our of faith development and turn our focus on ourselves, inward, instead of outward to the world or upward

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<sup>1</sup> Morrow, Barry (2013). *Yearning for More (Illinois: IVP Books)*, pp. 19-20

to God. Last week I invited us to give up “control” and the need for power. This week, what if we gave up expectations? What if for Lent we decided to let go of some of our preconceived notions about religion or life and traded our own expectations for more of God’s vision for us and our community?

Our text today comes from the Gospel of John and introduces us to Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader in the Jewish religion and a good, law-abiding man of faith. Nicodemus had his own expectations of how the Messiah was supposed to show up. But suddenly he began to see a crack in his expectations.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to try to figure out who Jesus was and what he was up to.

You can follow along with me in your Bible or on the screen; the gospel of John, 3:1-12 (NLT):

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”

Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

This conversation did not go as Nicodemus expected. He expected Jesus to explain how he had the authority of heaven but was so different than other religious leaders and teachers. He knew that faith worked a certain way. He knew the Messiah was supposed to do certain things... but he also knew that Jesus could not be the Messiah he had been expecting.

You see, for as long as Nicodemus could remember, there had been stories of the coming Messiah. In the earliest records of the Jewish faith—we read about those stories in the Old Testament—God had promised the Jewish people that they would be rescued. Nicodemus and his fellow Jews, leaders and ordinary people alike, were waiting on the Messiah with great expectation.

Ever since the days of exile, the Jews had expected a king, even greater and more powerful than their beloved King David; a king who would overthrow Rome. They expected the Messiah to come and set up a legitimate kingdom in their midst, put them in charge of their own destinies and give them all the peace, power and prosperity they could dream of.

And when Nicodemus encountered Jesus in the middle of the night, he carried with him all of these expectations. Jesus was not the Messiah Nicodemus was expecting, and Nicodemus was confused.

The Messiah was supposed to be a man of power and influence.

Yet, Jesus came from a poor family, not one of power or influence.

The Messiah was supposed to be a king, a part of the ruling class, spending time with governors and leaders.

But Jesus was born a baby in a manger surrounded by livestock. He was baptized by a wild man who ate insects and honey and never shaved or cut his hair. He wandered around the countryside spending time with poor, ritually unclean people, women & children, those who had no power or influence. In fact, Jesus rejected the powerful, influential people. He wanted nothing to do with them and he condemned their version of religion and righteousness.

Just before this night-time encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, Jesus had gone into the temple and knocked over tables and set the sacrificial birds free and accused temple leaders of turning God's house into a den of thieves and liars. John's gospel makes it clear—Jesus had no time for those who thought they were virtuous of their own accord. Instead, Jesus was there for those interested in a different kind of power; a power that comes through service, servitude, sacrifice, through loving others in the same powerful way that God loves us.

Jesus, John explains to us, *is* the Messiah. But he did not meet the expectations of the Pharisees, Scribes and religious rulers. Jesus rode on a little donkey, not a horse. He surrounded himself with fisherman and poor people, not a well-trained army. He spoke with the authority of heaven, but he spent his time with the least, the last, and the lost. He favored the poor over the powerful. He chose the outcast instead of those who were ceremonially clean and proper. When the time came to overthrow and set up his kingdom, Jesus chose instead to go to the cross without saying a word in his defense, even though everyone knew he was innocent of all wrongdoing. Jesus defied expectations. Jesus was Caliente when everyone was expecting Helado.

But Nicodemus was intrigued, enough to come in the middle of the night, out of sight of his colleagues and friends, to find out more about this man of God.

What's amazing about this encounter is that in his answers, Jesus continued to defy expectations. In order to be a part of God's kingdom, Jesus says, you must be born of spirit and of water. Nicodemus was terrified by this notion of being "born again." Birth defies all expectations. I don't remember what it was like to be in the womb, but I'm pretty sure that everything about that moment would have defied my expectations, if my tiny infant self had any. Being born is a vulnerable and risky proposition the first time around, let alone being "born again." Jesus knew this. It's why he used this metaphor.

Birth is messy and the birthing process is painful. There is great contrast how between the dark, safety of the womb and the full light of day in a passage that makes us feel we are being turned inside out. Besides that, none of us can manage or control our birth—or our rebirth. Nothing in our knowledge, training, or experience makes it possible for us to birth ourselves. We can't anticipate the process. We can't hold onto expectations as we pass from safety to risk, from the known to the unknown.

Birth both by water and by the Spirit is God's gift to give and make happen to create something new in Nicodemus and in us, a faith, freed from our limited expectations. Rebirth allows us to encounter the ever-changing Holy Spirit's movement in our world with excitement, even though we don't know what to expect.

Nicodemus was afraid when he asks "How can this be?" He desperately wanted to understand. He wanted to know the how and the why and the truth is that Jesus was showing Nicodemus- and us that- the Spirit was and is up to something—and whatever it is will be way outside of our expectations.

This idea of being "born again" has taken on a life of its own in our current religiosity of American Christianity. It's become in a sense the club's secret question—are you in or are you out? Are you one of us—born again—or are you on the outside? But John's point here isn't that rebirth is a badge of honor or a mark of belonging. Rebirth is God's process in us, exposing us to God's vision for the world, upsetting our own expectations and allowing us to see people as God sees them. To be born again isn't to be initiated into the Christian club, but to allow God's spirit to begin the transforming work of making us more like Jesus in the things we think, say, want, feel and do.

We miss the point when we think being born again is a choice we make. The rebirth is completely the Spirit's doing. But it does take input from us. We have to choose to let go of our own expectations about who God is and what God is supposed to be and do and allow God's Holy Spirit to give us a dream that's all up to God. A dream for reaching new people with the message that they are loved, just the way they are, even if they are different, even if they are in they make us uncomfortable, especially if they are in the margins of society and particularly if they want nothing to do with the Christianity of their own expectations.

None of this happens instantaneously. But if we allow God's grace and mercy to consume us and allow God's Spirit to do what it will with our lives, then little by little, we will find our own

lives looking more like Christ's and our own expectations being replaced by a new Kingdom-oriented framework.

Today, I invite us to be like Nicodemus. Carry our own expectations about God and faith and our own lives to Christ and be vulnerable enough to allow the Spirit to blow in and through and around us, to begin the rebirthing processes, to transform our ordinary lives into kingdom-builders, disciples who will carry God's message of love and hope to all people, even the ones who don't fit our expectations of what we think "Christian" should be.

And remember that not every birth happens the same way or in the same time. Labor can be quick and easy or it can be arduous and difficult. Though we participate in the process, the labor of rebirthing is God's work and it will be different as God works in and through each of us in different ways. We see that in the disciples. Some dropped their nets and followed quickly after Jesus.

Others, like the Woman at the Well, met Jesus in the brightest part of the day and worked out quickly that Jesus was the Messiah.

Still others were like Nicodemus, who came in the middle of the night, secretly working out faith for himself, until he was able to claim discipleship for his own.

It's interesting to note that Nicodemus disappears from the narrative of John's gospel for many chapters. We can assume that he just couldn't let go of his own expectations enough to embrace Jesus.

But then, at the very end, we read something remarkable:

Right after Jesus died on the cross, we read these words from John, chapter 19, verses 38 to 40:

Afterward Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a secret disciple of Jesus (because he feared the Jewish leaders), asked Pilate for permission to take down Jesus' body. When Pilate gave permission, Joseph came and took the body away. With him came Nicodemus, the man who had come to Jesus at night. He brought about seventy-five pounds of perfumed ointment made from myrrh and aloes. Following Jewish burial custom, they wrapped Jesus' body with the spices in long sheets of linen cloth.

By the time Jesus' work here on earth was done, Nicodemus, the man who came at night, had become a Christ-follower, had released his own expectations of what Messiah was supposed to be and embraced Jesus, God's son, Messiah who would save the world through the extraordinary love of his life, death and resurrection.

What an extraordinary message to us about faith and salvation. Salvation is not a light switch moment that we can control. It doesn't happen in an instant. Rather, salvation is a lifetime of walking in the Spirit and following Jesus, allowing the Spirit to, as Jesus explained, blow where it blows, following Christ by living how he taught us—humble, service-oriented lives focused on putting the other first and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

So do not be discouraged if you are sitting there in the dark trying to figure out who this Jesus is. Rather, embrace the journey. Ask your questions. Struggle with your doubt. And allow yourself enough vulnerability to let go of your own expectations so that God can create something new, in, with, through and for you.

This year for Lent, let's give up expectations, and embrace the unknown, the unexpected, and the uncontainable love of God, for us, for our church and for God's kingdom. Amen.