

Born Again (Again)
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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John 3:1-21

“Sometimes I feel my life is like a trapeze swing... I’m either hanging on for dear life or, for a few moments, I am hurtling across space in between.

Most of the time I spend hanging on for dear life to my trapeze bar. It carries me along at a steady, predictable rate of swing and I figure I’m in control: I know most of the right questions, and even some of the right answers.

But once in a while, as I am merrily (or not so merrily) swinging along I look out ahead of me into the distance and what do I see? I see another trapeze bar, swinging towards me. It’s empty. And I know in me, in that place that knows, that this new trapeze bar has my name on it. It’s my next step. It is my aliveness coming to get me. And in my heart of hearts I know that for me to grow, I have to release my grip on the present, well-known bar, to move onto the new one.

Now, each time it happens to me I hope, no, I pray, that I won’t have to grab the new one. But in my knowing place, I know that I must totally release my grasp on my own bar and for some moment in time I must hurtle across space before I can grab onto the new.

And each time, I’m filled with terror. It doesn’t matter that in all my previous hurtles across the void I know that I have always made it. Each time I am afraid that I will miss. That I’ll be crushed on the unseen rocks on the bottomless chasm between the bars.

But I do it anyway. Maybe this is the essence of what the mystics call the “faith experience”. No guarantees... no net... no insurance. You do it anyway because somehow hanging onto that old bar is no longer on the list of alternatives. And so, for an eternity that can last a microsecond or a thousand lifetimes, we soar across the dark void of “the past is gone, and the future is not yet here”.

It’s called... transition. And I have come to believe this is the only place where real change occurs. I mean, real change, not the pseudo-change that only lasts until the next time my old buttons get pushed.

And in our culture I have noticed that this transition zone is often looked upon as a no-thing, as a no-place. Sure, the old trapeze bar was real and the new one coming towards us, I sure hope that's real too. But the void between? That's just a scary, confusing, disorienting nowhere that must be gotten through as fast and as unconsciously as possible.

What a waste.

I have a sneaking suspicion that the transition zone is the only real thing and that the bars are illusions we dream up in order to avoid the place where the real change occurs. Now, whether or not my hunch is true, it remains that the transition zones in our lives are incredibly rich places. They should be honored, even savored.

With all the pain and fear and feelings of being out of control that can accompany transition, they are still the most alive, growth filled, passionate, expansive moments of our lives. And maybe, transformation may have nothing to do with making fear go away but rather giving ourselves permission to hang out in the void between trapeze bars.

Transforming our need to grab that new bar and asking ourselves to dwell in the only place where change really happens. It can be terrifying. It can also be enlightening – in the true sense of the word.

Hurling through the void, we may just learn how to fly.”¹

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night. Some scholars say he's afraid of being seen with Jesus, that he represents “closeted” early Christians who feared social ostracism. And maybe that's the case, from a historical perspective.

Others say that it's because in John's gospel, night and darkness are metaphors for ignorance, sin, and confusion – which, to be honest, we need to consider carefully, given the subtle overtones of racism that metaphor may unintentionally carry for our friends and neighbors with a darker skin pigment than ours.

¹ Introduction inspired by The Parable of the Trapeze - Danaan Parry;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWvV5N4hOGc>

But the fact that he came at night could be simply because Nicodemus is a Pharisee. Devout Pharisees often set the night aside for study, for pondering the Law. Most Pharisees had day jobs, after all. The psalms say that our hearts instruct us by night, that the righteous meditate on God on their beds. Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee, is accustomed to nightly study, and on this night, the subject of his study is Jesus.

But by the time Jesus gets finished with him, he's reduced to the futility of his ignorance. All he can muster is a helpless "I don't understand..." before he hangs his head and keeps still.

Jesus doesn't give him any easy answers. He rebuffs his well-meaning offer of faith based signs. Then he shocks his common sense with talk about a new birth from above, ignoring Nicodemus' protest that starting over is impossible, especially once you've gotten to be of a certain age.

Finally, Jesus unnerves him with a description of the Spirit-led life—the anarchy of breath and wind and energies unseen.

Living in the space between the trapeze bars.

That was all very well, Nicodemus thinks, but just how are you supposed to pull a thing like that off? How especially are you supposed to pull it off if you were pushing sixty-five? How do you get born again when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning? He even got a little sarcastic. Could one "enter a second time into the mother's womb?" he asked (John 3:4), when it was all one could do these days to enter a taxi without the driver's coming around to give him a shove from behind?

If Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to learn, Jesus sees to it that no ordinary learning takes place. He aims not to help Nicodemus understand, but to make him begin at the beginning; not to help him know, but to reduce him to unknowing, to drive him into a wilderness of silence, a desert of humility and obedience.

Nicodemus hails from a constituency that knows things—the Law, the oral traditions, the customs, the prophets, the prophecies. "Rabbi, we know," he says to Jesus. "We know who you are, we know what you do."

Jesus doesn't care one bit about what Nicodemus knows. He cares about Nicodemus' life. He wants to save it, and to do that, he first has to undermine it, undermine the sensible, reasoned thing that passes for a good and virtuous existence. And at the end, when all Nicodemus can do is throw up his hands, Jesus knows he has him.

Nicodemus lives today in everyone who has ever had to deal with the death of a loved one, with the derailment of a dream or the ending of a career, with the ashes of a lost relationship, with the failure of prayer, with the blank dullness of depression, with the powerlessness of addiction, with our despair over the human condition, he lives in everyone who has ever had to deal with the world's greed and violence that seems to spiral and build with no end in sight.

Nicodemus lives in all who have come to the end of our convictions, our denominational identities, our religious doctrines, all of us who have come to the end of our wisdom or skill or courage or knowledge or self-confidence;

Those of us who have hit that limit hard, head-on, and finally thrown up our hands in defeat in the face of implacable mysteries; all of us who have ever hung our heads in humility and surrender, who have ever just stood there long enough to finally hear a voice speak up and speak up out of the silence and say "*All right. Now you are ready, now you can begin.*"

Nicodemus lives in all of us who, reduced to the futility of our ignorance, begin again each and every day, and who are, by grace, becoming what we practice, becoming day by day even what we pretend to be, as all the while the Spirit moves where it will: in us, in our church, and in the world.

Moves in this world God so loved that God sent a beloved Child, not to condemn but to save.

We can never hear that message enough. God so loves the world. God so loves the world. God so loves the world. If only we have ears to hear it. And eyes to see it. And grace to receive it. Amen.