

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Lent 2014
St. James' Church. Mt. Airy
The Rev. Doctor Bill Doggett

My first day in the office here at St. James', I began poking around and reorganizing things, and one of the things I noticed was this Bible, which was sitting on the shelf in the entryway with a lot of miscellaneous stuff, some valuable, some less so. I took the Bible into my office to look at it and see whether it was someone's family Bible that had been donated to the church, a Thrift Store item that had been sent our way, or a historical treasure of the community.

Inside the Bible, it is inscribed as a gift to Pinkney Memorial Chapel, made on February 10, 1889 by Mrs. M. R. Poole. Never having heard of Pinkney Memorial Chapel (not surprisingly since it doesn't, and never did actually exist) I did some research which finally led me back to the history page on our own St. James' own website, where I discovered that when St. James' was being organized, the congregation hoped to name it Pinkney Memorial Chapel, in honor of The Rt. Rev. William Pinkney, fifth Bishop of Maryland, but that the Sixth Bishop of Maryland said no to the name, likely because there was already a Pinkney Memorial Church in Hyattsville, established some ten years earlier. So we became St. James' Church instead.

This Bible – let's call it the Pinkney Memorial Bible – was, no doubt, the original lectern Bible of this congregation, given, it seems, in a spirit of hope before the congregation was anything more than just a gathering of hopeful people.

So it turns out that this is a treasure of the community. The story of the Pinkney Bible is part of the heritage of this community, and this Bible, beyond being itself a collection of stories that are also our heritage, is an embodiment, a sacrament if you will, of that particular story – that once

there was a group of faithful people who dreamed this place into existence, and didn't let that dream die just because it had to be modified.

Our stories matter. Our stories, for both individuals and communities, are, to a great extent, our identities. They make sense of our past, constrain our present, and guide our future.

Our gospel story today is one of three stories in John's gospel about a man named Nicodemus. This is the first of those three, in which Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council of Elders in Jerusalem, sneaks away by night to have this odd and inspiring conversation with Jesus.

The second time John's gospel mentions him, Nicodemus is defending Jesus before the Sanhedrin, and saying that the laws of their community require a fair hearing before anyone is condemned, and for his efforts Nicodemus gets accused of being a Galilean (which was both a clan designation and an insult in first-century Jerusalem) and therefore accused of being biased in Jesus' favor.

Nicodemus' third appearance in John's gospel is after Jesus' death, when he helps Simon of Arimathea bury Jesus, and provides the myrrh and aloe with which to anoint Jesus' body.

Three brief stories about a man on a quest for understanding and truth and where that quest leads him. And we can be sure that these became the defining stories of Nicodemus' life – the stories he used to explain himself to himself and to the world, because, for at least the first two of the three, John could have had no other source than Nicodemus himself.

Imagine the way John heard this story from Nicodemus: You see, John, I came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” And Jesus told me, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” So I said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” And Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” But I was astonished. So of course I said to him, “How can these things be?” And Jesus answered me, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” And then he said the most amazing things about God’s love and God’s son, and eternal life, and I didn’t really understand him at the time, but let me tell you John, I couldn’t stop thinking about it, and ever since then, nothing in my life has ever been the same.

Our best personal stories are the ones that end like that: “Ever since then, nothing has been the same.” “That was the moment when everything changed.” We sometimes call those moments epiphanies, and we treasure them in our lives, even if we don’t always feel comfortable sharing the often weird and confusing stories with others.

But the funny thing is, it's not the life-changing events that really matter. It's the change of life that follows them that makes the difference. Nicodemus could have had his strange midnight conversation with Jesus and decided that he was hearing the ravings of an eccentric and gone back to business as usual at the Sanhedrin. When he told the story of it, he could have made himself the central character, and his own wisdom or discernment or transformation or perhaps his cynicism or disdain the main point of the story. The fact of the matter is that this was the moment that made all the difference for Nicodemus because he chose to be changed by it. And it has the possibility of being transformative for us because he chose to tell about what was transformative for him, rather than about his own transformation.

No doubt you have had moments in your life that were very significant turning points on the path to becoming who you are today, for better or for worse. And what made those moments significant, what made them more than an amusing anecdote about something that happened to you or a completely forgotten experience is what came after. The new direction you took, the shift in attitude or outlook, the relationship you formed or strengthened or left behind – those are what make that triggering event significant.

And the stories you tell shape and reshape that significance for yourself and the world as you tell and retell them. And although you can't choose what happens to you, you can choose how to tell the story.

We can tell the story of the Pinkney Memorial Bible as a story of an interesting historical oddity, or of the peculiar ideas of people long ago, but we can also tell it as the story of how the people in whose footsteps we follow in this community lived in hope, and dreamed large, and let their hopes and dreams inspire their generosity and their hard work, of which this Bible and this congregation are the visible signs. And we can live and work and dream in the hope that our descendents might tell a similar story about us.

Amen.