

John 3:1-17

A Sermon by Christy Wetzig, *Parish Associate*

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Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit^[b] gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You^[c] must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”^[d]

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Stewart Luckman was my sculpture professor in college. He had been a football coach—he was tall and bulky, with a red face and a wild mane of curly white hair and an aptitude for yelling. You could tell it was a bronze-pouring day by the volume of his yells, which you could hear all the

way to the music department, and the scurrying of students whose dread and excitement was so intense you could almost see it like a trembling halo around each scurrying head. I was pretty afraid of him.

You would find Stewart to ask a question, something like, “I can’t get the foot to look like it’s holding up the body. How can I make it feel like it’s more rooted and weighty?” And he would look at you with his ice blue eyes and say, something like, “You know, a squirrel will bury some acorns to eat for later. And it forgets where they are and a tree grows there. You know? You know?” And you were supposed to stroke your chin and nod and say, “I get it. That makes sense.” And go back to work. At least that’s what I did. And then I would ask my neighbor, “How do you think I should get this foot to look more weighty?”

I feel like Jesus has taken a play from Stewart Luckman’s book. Here Nicodemus has come to Jesus with some questions, and Jesus responds with metaphors and stories, and says, “You know? You know? Don’t you get it?”

Nicodemus has come in the dark and the quiet, maybe because he’s afraid of his peers, the other leaders in the synagogue, or maybe because that’s the time that you ask big, scary questions whose answers might rattle you to your core. Except it’s not really a question that he begins with—he says, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do.” He’s telling Jesus what he knows. And he’s right, but instead of praising his intuition, Jesus decides to shake him up a little. “So you think you know some things. You can’t really know anything until you’ve been *born* again.” *You know? Do you get it?*

And Nicodemus decidedly does not get it. He imagines cramming himself back inside his mother’s uterus. Jesus is turning him upside down and shaking him till all the coins rattle out of his pockets. He shakes him out of his certainties about God, which is something Jesus loved to do, and I think is still doing.

Today we think we have this metaphor nailed down. It's been used and reused as the decision that we need to make to give our lives to Jesus and follow him in a new life. And there's nothing wrong with that.

But I think we have the metaphor all backwards.

The thing about birth is that all the work is done by the person who's doing the birthing, not the person being born. Having been on both sides of the operation, I'm pretty sure that's the case.

Jesus gives Nicodemus a hard time for not understanding, since everything he's talking about does come from the Hebrew Scriptures. Our former pastor back in St. Paul, Debbie Blue, says the waters that existed before the creation of the world has been seen as amniotic water, the waters of birth. Like Terra said on Wednesday, God birthed the cosmos into being. Debbie also says there's a Hebrew word for God's mercy, compassion, and love that also can be translated as "womb." What if that were the place of our origin, to be birthed out of the deep well of God's mercy and compassion? And there's another Hebrew word for "grieve," which can also be translated as the pain of childbirth, which is what God was doing as he drove Adam and Eve out of the garden. And that was just the beginning. Imagine ten thousand years of childbirth, grief, and pain as God labors to bring her children into the world. Imagine God bent over and gasping, crying and shouting and swearing, splitting in two for the sake of bringing her loved, anticipated child into the world.

I'm sure Nicodemus was comfortable with the metaphor of God as a father, but I bet this image of God would have given him the willies. The thing that makes me uncomfortable about this metaphor (besides the bodily fluids) is that I don't want to be the child being born. To go from somewhere warm and protected, to be squeezed as if your life were ending, to enter the cold and be poked, to lose your lifeline of nutrition and know what it means to be hungry for the first time. None of this sounds really great; it sounds pretty traumatic in fact. But even more, to be birthed means to be utterly dependent. That's the part I don't really like.

To be born again in the evangelical sense looks like a fully formed adult deciding to stand up at the altar call, but *this* is more like the feeling of your head downward, engaged, feeling the press of muscle squeezing against you, from which there is no backward option. And then to take a breath and cry and wait to be swaddled.

Jesus tries another metaphor, a story Nicodemus knows well. Before the Israelites settle in the Promised Land, they complain again to Moses. “We have nothing to eat or drink. Also we hate this food you’ve given us.” (I adore that complaint. So childish and human.) God, who has had enough, sends a swarm of serpents to bite them. When in their suffering they predictably repent of their complaints, God tells Moses to make a serpent of bronze and put it high on a pole. All they had to do to be healed from their snakebite is to look at the bronze serpent.

And Jesus says, just like that serpent, I will be lifted up to save you. He continues. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” All it took was to look at the bronze serpent. You didn’t have to believe all that much. Just enough to turn your head and look at the thing.

It was a familiar story, but it would have been shocking for Nicodemus to hear, because while he knew from the Hebrew Scriptures that God loved God’s own people, the Jews, never does it say that God loves the whole world. For Nicodemus, and the gospel of John too, “the world” is a place of darkness, a place of hatred and estrangement, a place that denies God. From John 1: “[The Word] was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.”

How could God love these people who deny and reject God? Jesus offers no explanation. Yet we hear from him that the world didn’t have to prove its worth or get its act together in order to deserve God’s love. Somehow, God loved it as it was, in its war-mongering and darkness and rejection of God, like the mother laboring and in pain, whose love can somehow extend to the source of her pain.

And like a laboring mother, that love isn't just a warm fuzzy feeling. We hear "For God so loved the world" like I would say "I so love popsicles," but a better translation is "This is how God loved the world." God could not stay back and love the world from a distance—instead that love for the world compelled God to act, to give the Son to the world, even though God knew the great cost of this gift. The very shape God's love took on was that of a baby in a manger, a man on a cross. It was an extravagant gift, the gift of a lover to the beloved, even a beloved that doesn't recognize God's love or return it or deserve it.

The lectionary text ends here, but I feel like it ends in the middle of a thought, so I'll continue reading. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: that the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed."

I'm still part of that world whose predilection is for darkness. Sometimes I choose to not trust God, because I would prefer to not let the particular darkness of my soul be exposed. Instead of believing this word that God loves me as I am, I prefer to hide my darkness, I put up an acceptable facade, the thing I let you all see, but there in the dark remains what I prefer to not be seen—my tendency to judge, my pride, how I put others down to feel better about myself, how quickly I lie to protect my mistakes, how I always try to take the easy path. I love my darkness. I cling to it. I protect it, even though it condemns me.

That's why I have to come here every week, to own up to the darkness in my soul, to speak those beautiful words of God into the darkness, that I am forgiven, that God loves me in all of it. We sing together, three times, "Lord, have mercy." Not because we didn't receive it the first time, but because we need to hear it again and again, that God does not let the darkness of our

souls get in the way of God's love for us, that God is continually birthing us into the light, first our wrinkled heads, then our slippery shoulders, then all the way to our toes.

In all four Gospels, Joseph of Arimathea takes Jesus' body from Pilate and buries it. In John, however, he's joined by an accomplice. Nicodemus, who buys the spices to anoint Jesus' body.

Nicodemus finally got it. Maybe not on that warm, fragrant night in which Jesus shook him up, but slowly, slowly, it dawned on him, the extravagant gift that was Jesus, and he began to feel the squeeze of birth, to trust God's love in spite of his darkness, to look up with feeble—and then growing—hope at the source of his redemption.

How are you feeling, this Lent? Are you feeling the squeeze?