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John 3:1-17

Born Again, and Again, and Again

Introduction to Scripture: After spending the season of Epiphany charting our own course here with a six-week series on the book of Job, for Lent we've returned to following the lectionary, which is the church's calendar of assigned readings. Beginning today, the lectionary gives us four weeks of sequential readings from the Gospel of John.

Given that John will be our text for the next weeks, I'd like to begin today by offering some words of introduction to John's Gospel, and so this will be a sort of Bible Study type sermon.

In many ways John's is the most unique Gospel that we find in the Bible. The other three—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are often grouped together and referred to as the Synoptic Gospels—synoptic meaning sharing the same view, or sharing the same perspective. These three Gospels present a pretty similar account of Jesus' life—and in general it's a pretty straightforward historical and narrative account of where Jesus went, of what he did, and of what he said and taught.

John's Gospel, on the other hand, presents a radically different glimpse or portrait of Jesus. If the other three Gospels read as history and as story, John reads more as poetry and philosophy.

So for example, rather than beginning with the familiar Christmas account of Jesus' birth, John begins with a quite abstract rendering of what he takes to be the cosmic importance or the deeper, hidden meaning of Christ's birth.

A key term in this famous opening passage is the Greek word Logos. It's often translated simply as Word with a capital W, but I think for many that doesn't really capture the full meaning here, as Logos is a key word in Greek philosophy and means something more like the structure of things or the order of the universe.

And so the opening poem of John begins, *"In the beginning was the Word (or the structure and the order of things) and the order of things was with God, and the order of things was God..."* The thread of this thought continues until we come to what is perhaps the key verse to this entire Gospel, when we read, *"And the Word, or the order of things, became flesh and lived or dwelt among us."*

The Greek phrase here for the idea of the Word living or dwelling among us means more literally "pitching its tent among us," which is an image that I love—about God setting up camp next to us, pitching a tent, unrolling a sleeping bag, sitting by the fire, staring up at the stars... and given the transient nature of a camp as with the transient nature of life

more generally, this image also evokes God as also traveling with us and camping alongside us throughout our pilgrim journey.

Today in our scripture we will hear another one of the most familiar passages from the Gospel of John, the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. As always with John, the language is meant to be poetic and evocative, reflecting the evocative experience that Nicodemus had when meeting Jesus, and reflecting more generally the evocative experience of whenever we encounter the type of God who travels from afar to set up camp next to us. I invite you now to listen for the type of evocative encounter or even for the revelation that God has for you today in these words, our reading from the Gospel of John, chapter 3:

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus 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?"

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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "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? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Continuing with this idea of using our time this morning to engage in a type of Bible Study together—I want to begin with a question for you about what we just heard. I don't think it's a particularly difficult question, but we'll see—the question is, when or what time of day does Nicodemus go to see Jesus?

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night! It's a small detail in the text, and yet it's one of those small details that says so much. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. This can set

the imagination churning. Maybe he just didn't want to be seen, particularly by his Pharisee friends who were at odds with Jesus. Or maybe he found himself in that state of emotional or spiritual duress that the anxieties of the night can sometimes bring—maybe he came to Jesus with a burning question, a question that wouldn't let go of him, and wouldn't let him rest in peace.

In fitting with this nighttime appearance, Nicodemus is a shadowy figure in John's Gospel throughout; he sort of hovers at the margins of the story. Although we never hear whether he decides to follow Jesus or not, he will show up twice more—once at one of Jesus' trials, and again at his death as Nicodemus is the one who will prepare the corpse for burial.

But here we find him for the first time stepping out into the dark night, wrapping himself in a cloak of shadows, and approaching this person he had only heard about but never met. He addresses Jesus as 'Rabbi', meaning teacher, and indeed he seems like a student here—quite eager and curious to hear what Jesus has to say, even if the nighttime approach also suggests that he's also a bit careful and cautious and hesitant.

One commentary on this passage begins with the following statement: *"If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of twenty first century church members, it might be Nicodemus."* The idea here is that Nicodemus is neither the first nor the last to follow Jesus from afar, or to hover at the margins of faith, or to risk approaching Jesus only at night, only in secret. When it comes to his commitment to following Jesus, Nicodemus, perhaps like many of us, seems to be in a situation like that of the song Hokey-Pokey, he puts one foot in, then he takes one foot out.

And so Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night—eager and curious and cautious and uncertain—and he has a chance to hear what Jesus has to say, and yet by the time that the conversation is over, he seems to be in the same spot that he started in—still eager and curious and cautious and uncertain. The last words we hear from Nicodemus here are, *"How can these things be?"* Indeed, that question about what Jesus says—how can these things be?—might very well be our question as well this morning.

So let's consider what he says. Jesus' message here hinges on two powerful statements, the first calling on Nicodemus to be born again, the second calling on him to believe, specifically to believe in Jesus.

These are some of the most well known but also some of the most controversial of all verses in scripture, and so I offer these thoughts this morning as someone who also is eager and curious and cautious and uncertain when it comes to the exact meaning of these passages.

I'd like to think about them in reverse order, and so first the idea of what it means to believe in Jesus. This is the famous passage that's instantly recognizable simply by its verse, John 3:16. We see it on billboards and bumper stickers and on posters at sporting events, among other places. It's the verse that goes,

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

The first thing I'm struck by here is the beginning of that statement, that God so loved the world. I'm struck by the universality of it, by the wide-open embrace. It doesn't say God so loved the church, or God so loved one group of people as opposed to another, but that God's love is for everyone and everything.

The next thing I'm struck by is this idea of believing. I wonder how it's been for you, but my experience and understanding of what it means to believe has changed quite a bit during my life. I think when I was younger I thought that to believe was a simple matter of giving cognitive assent to something, as in I believe that $2 + 2 = 4$, or I believe that tomorrow the sun will rise again. Such belief seemed pretty cut and dry, either you had this type of belief or you didn't.

Believing has recently become a more complicated and a more exciting matter for me, and I've been helped in this by many teachers and wise people who have pointed out the etymology of this word 'belief'. At its ancient Old English and Proto-Indo-European root, to believe means to hold something dear, it means to care about something or to hold it in high regard, it means something like to love, or to give our heart to. It turns out that to believe and to belove are like sister words, such that what we believe in is what we love, and that what we love is what we believe in. We still sometimes use believe in this way today, as for example, if my good friend is facing some difficulty or challenge in life, and if I say simply "I believe in you," it's as if I'm saying I trust you, I have confidence in you, I care about you, I love you. When we think about Jesus then in this way, and about the way of life that he represents, the matter of believing in him becomes I think a much more interesting and exciting affair.

Finally, the first part of Jesus' message this morning is his idea about being born again. What he says here totally baffles Nicodemus, perhaps because he, like so many after him, thinks that Jesus is speaking literally here when he's clearly speaking more spiritually and metaphorically.

There's even a sense of comedy to this exchange. Given that he takes Jesus literally, Nicodemus has to ask the question that most of us would find too silly or too absurd to even ask—he has to ask Jesus, how can this be, can a person really re-enter the womb and be physically born again?

Of course, Jesus is trying to speak about something else here, something that's hard to talk about without poetry and metaphor; he's trying to speak about what our relationship with God is really like, and so he's offering an invitation to Nicodemus—Nicodemus who is well-educated, a leader in the community, who knows a lot about a lot—he's trying to invite him to let go of what he knows, and to let go of the need to know, and instead to trust and to give himself to—to give his heart to—the unpredictable and uncontrollable promptings of God's call upon his life which, like the mystery of the wind that Jesus mentions, blows where it chooses, and we hear the sound of it, but we don't know where it comes from or where it goes.

Jesus invites Nicodemus to loosen his grip on life, so that he might find himself living life more fully, which is to say more faithfully, which is to say more in accordance with the way and order and structure of things, which is to say in this universe where things are always in the process of becoming and emerging, Jesus invites Nicodemus, he invites anyone who will listen really, to be born, not just once, but again, and again, and again. Amen.