

**John 3:1-17**

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." (365)

I had easy pregnancies. Lucky as I am when it comes to physical health, I had little cause for worry or even discomfort. So, when it came to appointments with my obstetrician, Dr. Moore, we had a fair amount of time for chit chat.

Apparently, Dr. Moore has been known for that. A Google search reveals him retiring from his practice in Taos last November. That's where he went when he moved from the Berkshires many years back. The headline in *The Taos News* reads: "Retiring OBGYN emphasized communication with patients."

In my case, there wasn't much to communicate of the medical, which left a lot of time for chit-chat.

Once, as I remember it, he'd just returned from an obstetrics convention, something annual. Research doctors would present papers there, all their most recent findings. Their panel discussions would keep practicing doctors up on the latest research. Every year, he said, there'd be a paper presenting the latest theory on what initiates labor is, the latest research around it all: what makes it so a baby is ready to be born, what makes it so a pregnancy is ready to be finished and the mother is ready to give birth and the baby is ready to be born: this whole complex that makes up this one event, which can't even be described well in English. Ours, after all, is a language in which

we need a subject in every sentence, someone to be the initiating actor of the action of the sentence. And it's not clear who that would be when it comes pregnancy and birth. Who is the subject here, who is *doing* the action? The mother? The baby? The relationship between the two?

English doesn't have the middle voice anymore. We only really have the active voice and the passive voice. There's only the most awkward ways to speak of actions that take place because of multiple actors who are also that upon which the action takes place. Both subject and object. Both agent and that upon which or through which agency moves.

Get it? No? That's what I'm talking about.

The middle voice: it's there in ancient Greek, the language in which Christianity was first imagined and grew, the language in which Christianity was first *conceived* and developed. It's there in the Bible.

Importantly, I think.

Why does no one talk about this?

But I digress.

Back to birth, to giving birth, to being born. Setting aside who initiates it all, and who is the one upon which that initiation plays out, this perhaps more fitting for the metaphysicians, we'll leave it to the physicians to consider the "what" of it all. How comes to be the end of the pregnancy and the beginning of birth?

Is it something about the ratio between size of the mother and size of the baby? No, of course not, otherwise we'd have no premature births, everyone would be born in exact ratio to the size of the mother.

Is it something biochemical in the mother, something biochemical in the mother-baby relationship?

Is it something of the placenta?

It's not simple timing, of course, as pregnancy is known in concept to last forty weeks but almost never lasts exactly forty weeks.

So, what is it?

He was amused, as I remember it, Dr. Moore was, amused at this sort of desperate search, this desperate need, not a need to *know* exactly, but a need not to be kept in the dark. "We're scientists after all! And pregnancy is as common a thing as can be and has been going on for as long as anyone can remember. We should be able to figure this out!"

It's the white whale. How can you not find something as big as a whale? It's the Holy Grail. How came the cup of Christ to be lost? Did *no one* decide to keep track of it? Why can't we find out what we're trying to find out?

I'll admit, I delighted in this elusiveness. Healthy as I am, easy as my pregnancies were over all, I had the privilege of delighting in this not-knowing. Being pregnant and giving birth: these were the most powerful things I'd ever been a part, and likely will ever be a part of, and it was utterly out of my control. And I liked it that way. I didn't want this even to come close to being something over which I could have some control.

Because power and control are not the same thing. You know that, right? Power and control are *not* the same thing.

Fun fact. "Control," the word, shows up in scripture, in the translation I tend to use, around 40 times. Considering all 66 books of the Bible, that isn't very many. What's more, it's always either in reference to something people should aim to have in regard to themselves, self-control; or in regard to their desire, getting their desire under control. It's never in reference to how God expresses himself or behaves in response to the created order; it's never in reference to anything of God. And it's not in any of the four gospel narratives, not in any of the remembered actions or encounters that were all about Jesus. And when it comes to the Holy Spirit, this aspect of God we celebrated last week, this aspect of God who completes the Trinity, which we celebrate this week? The Holy Spirit? Control? No.

This whole thing, then: *this*, our seeking after God, our coming together to encounter and to abide with God: it's about power, God's power, the Spirit's power, and what good these empower us to do. It's not about control, neither about controlling this wild creation nor about controlling one another, much as we might like these things, much as we might even *need* these things at least in some measure. We need shelter: this built bit of control. We need to raise and discipline our young: this so they can grow and function on their own.

I imagine Nicodemus was someone who liked control. A Pharisee, an expert on the Law and on what it takes to have a life well lived, he perhaps enjoyed this sense of control—which isn't to impugn him. There's nothing wrong with wanting some control over all of this gorgeous, terrifying, dynamic existence of ours. No, a Pharisee was even intended to have control, or at least to communicate the comfort that can come with that. He was a leader of the people. He was someone who'd have studied and trained in the ways of God for the people, the ways of living in accordance with the Law of God, which was given to the people for the people.

Pharisees were numerous. They lived out in the field, among the people. They were to be found in every village, in every synagogue. Not confined in their holy tasks to the Temple, as the Temple priests, the Scribes, and the Sadducees all were, the Pharisees were more like a combination parish priest, local law enforcement, and family legal counsel.

They're also often understood as the bad guys in the Christian story. But this is reductive. As an expression of a much larger social system, they were the stumbling blocks to the way of Jesus, but not because they were bad guys, each and all. No, on the contrary, you could argue that they were such stumbling blocks because they were good.

The way of Jesus was a disruption.

Jesus himself was terrible disruption.

And people need stability. They need reliability. *Society* needs such things. Especially societies that are held within a larger tyranny, as Israel was back in the day. Rome had Israel in its grip, and as long as this backwater province didn't do anything crazy, Rome would leave them alone to their weird provincial ways that though claimed some universal truth. One God who was the God of all creation: okay, ancient Jews. Say what you want. No one's listening anyway.

That was the deal: be quiet about your disobedience to Rome and Rome will turn a blind eye. Be regular and reliable about not doing what you're supposed to, not playing along with the imperial proclamations and their pagan ways, and Rome will ignore that you're not worshipping the emperor as the sun-god.

But Jesus: Jesus thrown everything off balance, in the words of the Misfit of Flannery O'Connor's destabilizing story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Jesus disrupted all that with moves that violated the way of the Jews and broke out of their tidy confines. The empire would feel that breakout, and this couldn't be let to happen. If Jesus weren't stopped, then all Judea might be instead.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night.

That's what the story says.

It's thought he did so in order that his approach would escape notice. Jesus had something Nicodemus wanted but which he knew he shouldn't want. Jesus was onto something that Nicodemus suspected might be worthwhile but broke with the norms that he'd lived by forever. It's as if something beckoned him, beckoned him out of his well-structured world in which he had a fair amount of professed control, which profession reassured others that all things were well in hand, beckoned him out into a wilder realm, a more mysterious realm.

He doesn't ask Jesus a question, not at first anyway.

He doesn't make any requests.

He doesn't mean to argue with him or test him, as Pharisees have been said to mean to do in other encounters.

He just means to tell him, "...we know you are a teacher who has come from God..."

He never even says who's meant by "we." It's like he means almost to hide himself amidst a "we." A zebra, as you might know, will join other zebras in what's called a dazzle. It keeps any one of them safe from being overtaken. But the narrative voice will have none of that. No, Nicodemus shall be named, individuated from his group, a privilege not everyone who approached Jesus enjoyed, a challenge not everyone who approached Jesus was made to endure.

We see you, Nicodemus. We know it's you.

He would show up again later, Nicodemus would. He would show up at the cross, after Jesus had died. He would bring nard, a lot of it, an expensive amount of it. He would work with Joseph of Arimethea to remove the body, to take it away to prepare it for burial in the grave Joseph gave to the effort.

We see you, Nicodemus. We know it's you, trying to grasp this whole notion of being born from above.

We should give him credit: it's hard to grasp. It's actually impossible to grasp. You must allow for it to grasp you. You must wait. You must pray. You must hear of it and then set it aside as an agenda item, something on your bucket-list (to get born again), and less still something of a religious imperative (to get born from above)—because it's really not about what you can manage to do. Like being born the first time, being born again and this time from above, it's really not about what you can manage to accomplish, what decision you might make and action you might take to make it happen. You're not in control of this. You're really not.

It might happen. And maybe today. And you'll participate in its happening. You'll be a part of it. But it won't be up to you and you alone. We're in the middle voice here. Get used to it.

Jesus could have chosen any analogue for this need. He could have employed any manner of analogy for making intelligible this spirited mystery. He could have said, "You have to turn," or "You have to intend," or "You have to decide," or "You have to come and see," which he did indeed elsewhere in this very gospel. But here he says, "You have to be born," that mysterious middle voice, something that happens to you though you participate in it, something you're both active in but also acted upon. It's both/and.

And by whom, by *whom* are you acted upon? Well, who do you think?

It's a terrible travesty that so much contemporary Christianity misses that middle-voice place, misconstrues this as an action that any would-be believer has to take upon himself or herself, lest all be lost. Our Christianity has become in some of its forms so terribly aggressive, so terribly willful. But there's this, at the heart of it all: "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."

Today is Trinity Sunday, the only Sunday of the church year when we celebrate a doctrine. The Trinity: this way of imaging God that emphasizes God as relationship, not static but dynamic, not a state but movement, not something you grasp once and for all but something that grasps you and then lets you go.

Don't bother trying to understand it, or not as your primary activity in its regard. It's not worth it. Rather instead try to imagine it, and then to live into it.

See where God might be the Father-Creator, the one who abides before the beginning and after the end, our origin and our aim, where we come from and where'll end up, surely each of us and all.

See where God might be the Son-Human, the one walks with us and shows us the way, the one joins us when we feel like we can't take another step, we're too afraid of where we headed, either to that final exam or into that final stage or simply into the future, that vast unknown. See where the human might be aiming to remind us of the wonder of the human, while so much around us tells us all the ways in which we humans are harmful or destructive or worthy of being abandoned, who instead reminds us of our capacities for awe and love and creativity and compassion.

See where God might be Spirit by which the eternal one breaks into time, the one who abides before the beginning and dwells beyond the end and who now breaks into the living of our days to enlighten us, or empower us, or to correct us and discipline us, to gather us as church, this new politics whose aim is love and whose means are love and whose expression is freedom and belonging and mutual care and joy, to call us from the future and to encourage us to keep coming, the one who is our very breath, this mystery of life that fills us and then empties us to move on through history to fill others to come.

If you don't get it, don't worry about it. The aim isn't to get it but to get got by it—and if that's your aim, then it's already happening. The labor has begun and you are both mother and baby and the being of birth.

Welcome to eternal life, crowning now.

Thanks be to God.