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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church  
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Text: John 3:1-17

**Born Again Christians**

Today in our Gospel we meet a man named Nicodemus.  
He’s a familiar character.  
We know him because he happens to live within one of the most popular Gospel stories of all time – the third chapter of John.  
And this chapter is so popular because it contains one of the most famous verses of all time:  
“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son into the world…”

But Nicodemus is also familiar, because he reminds me of us.  
He reminds me of many 21st century Christians.  
He’s successful and self-confident.  
He has a leadership role in his faith community.  
He’s spiritually open and curious and yet also rational.  
He’s committed enough that he makes an appointment to talk with Jesus face to face.  
But he’s also private about the whole thing.  
He goes to Jesus late at night, so no one else will know it.  
He wants to keep his faith separate from the rest of the life,  
Like any good and prudent person.  
He’s not ready to declare his faith in Jesus publicly and let it change how he makes his decisions and lives his life.\(^1\)

Doesn’t this sound familiar?  
A curiosity, a wonder, and an interest in the social networks and bonds,  
But a hesitancy to shout from the rooftops.  
Doesn’t this sound like you and me and so many church-goers of today?  
Nicodemus is a familiar friend.  
A sympathetic character in a classic story.

Now that we’re identifying with Nicodemus, I find Jesus’ response to him a bit off-putting.  
He’s impatient with him,  
Even mocks him a little,  
“You’re a faithful leader in your community and you don’t get this?” He says, in so many words.  
Now to be fair, Jesus has had a long day.  
It was just earlier that morning when Jesus burst through the temple doors and flipped the tables of the money changers.  
So I think his tolerance was a little lower than normal.

Within Jesus’ response to our familiar friend,  
He invokes the imagery of birth.

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\(^{1}\) Feasting on the Word, Pastoral perspective, 68.
He tells Nicodemus that the only way to take the next step in faith is to be born again, Not through his mother’s womb, But through “water and the holy Spirit.” This language of “being born again” is some of the most famous imagery of the Gospel, Especially in certain religious circles. It’s been used to polarize believers between the Nicodemus types who hide their faith in darkness, and those believers who have publicly accepted Jesus as their personal Savior.

Today I want to linger over that imagery of rebirth. Not thinking of it in the usual ways, but in some new ways that could open this Gospel back up for us.

In the back and forth with Nicodemus, Jesus compares him to a baby still gestating in the womb. “You need to be born from above,” he tells him. You haven’t yet received this second birth of faith, And you’re still growing and developing. You need to be born again.

Try to put down all your cultural baggage with that expression for a moment. Try to shelve the divisive uses of that phrase, And hear it again anew…

Jesus tells Nicodemus he’s like a baby gestating in the womb. And at this moment I want us to imagine Jesus like a pregnant woman at full-term. Stomach engorged, feet swollen, clothes hardly fitting anymore. I imagine the impatience of Jesus in that moment. Jesus, who has loved carrying His believers to full-term, Now saying, “Alright baby, it’s time. It’s time to come out. It’s time to be born again.”

This is the impatience Jesus may have felt with Nicodemus that night. Not some kind of condemnation, But a parental impatience that suggests, “Please, can we move onto the next stage together?”

I remember the last days of pregnancy with Abe. As I waddled around my house in the late summer, cleaning baseboards and assembling baby furniture, I found myself urging him to come on out. Not because I didn’t love him, But precisely because I loved him. I wanted to meet him outside my body. I wanted him to be born so that I could spend more time with him. So I could watch him grow, So I could learn from him, And teach him, And share him with everyone I loved.
This is how I imagine Jesus with us.
He understands that we’re still gestating Christians.
Some of us are still hidden in the dark womb,
Unable or still unwilling to make a public, independent entrance into a fully owned faith.
Jesus knows that we’re still growing,
Seeking the nourishment of God before we can nourish ourselves.
But God wants us to be born into a new and fuller faith,
So that we can be in deeper relationship with God.

As I was thinking about the expression “born again” I thought of how misleading it can be.
The typical use of that phrase has to do with some kind of emotional and mental agreement we
make to follow Jesus,
Some kind of rational ascent.

But there’s nothing rational about being born.
And with all due respect to the babies of the world,
There’s a lot more work being done by the birth-er than by the one birthed.

So I think of it with our passage today.
Think not so much of Nicodemus or us in our particular struggles for understanding.
Think more about the God who is eager to do the hard, messy, sweating labor that will bring us
to maturity and new life.2

This isn’t about us getting our spiritual lives in order.
It’s not about our ability to follow some kind of spiritual map,
Making the right turns,
So we end up in heaven.

This is about the God who’s been laboring for us since time began.
For thousands of years.
Think of that kind of love, that would groan and labor so long,
Just to bring us into new life.
It brings a whole new understanding to the term “born again Christians.”
It’s not about us.
It never was.
It’s about God.

And this is God is longing to be in relationship with us.
To watch us grow.
Just like with birth, we’re not abandoned after we’ve made our journey through the birth canal.
Christ remains with us.
Christ is with us in our Baptism – that Sacrament of our rebirth –
When we’re bathed in the holy water that was present when God first labored over the world at creation,

2 Ibid.
And marked with the oil of the Holy Spirit that reminds us that nothing can ever break this bond between us and our creator.

You might not remember your baptism,
But Christ is also with us each week in the sharing of the Eucharist.
When I imagine Christ carrying us within himself,
Just as we carry our children,
It changes the way I hear the words: “This is my body – broken for you.”
“This is my blood, poured out for you and all my people, for the forgiveness of sins.”

These acts of worship are meant to draw us into closer relationship with the God who carries us for life.

So yes, Jesus was impatient with our dear friend Nicodemus.
He had the impatience of a pregnant woman at full-term,
Eager for his child to take the next step in the journey,
And to join him in deeper relationship outside the womb.

So it is with us,
Christ continually offering His body and his blood to us,
Offering us the invitation of a born-again faith.
A faith not lived in the dark,
And faith not limited to the social networks of our church,
But a faith with the power to transform our selves, our souls, and bodies.

Perhaps you’re left like Nicodemus, mouth gaping open, asking “How can this be?”
And perhaps you’re ready to receive the invitation of new life,
Which is offered again and again and again,
Until we finally say yes,
And join with the God who has been waiting for us to be born again.