

“The Dark Womb of Lent”  
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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Genesis 12:1-4a  
John 3:1-17

“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Nicodemus asked these questions of Jesus, who answered about a different kind of birth: one that is born of the Spirit. I love it that the gospel gives us this idea of the Spirit giving birth to us, using feminine imagery for the divine on this Sunday that follows International Day of the Woman. We could think of this season of Lent as a dark womb, preparing us for such spiritual rebirth. But first, I ask that we spend time with Nicodemus’ interesting and thoughtful questions-- questions he asked of Jesus in the darkness of nighttime.

To refresh my understanding of what happens after birth, I asked our newest parents, Nicole and Cory, to comment on how they felt after bringing little Julian in the world. We chatted on Facetime on Thursday night, with Julian resting contentedly on his father’s chest the whole time. At one point he wriggled his little face to the side and opened his eyes. So far, he’s a peaceful little kid. As for Nicole and Cory, Cory says that what has changed has been his expertise at a quick and confident diaper change. But more than that, they both agree that after a month of them battling an outrageous flu and doing extremely long hours at the office and feeling anxious about Nicole’s health and the health of the baby to come, now that he is here, and they are on parental leave, they say a calm has washed over them. Their anxieties about work have dissipated as their new priority snuggles before them, and they feel an amazing support from one another.

Feeling calm and peaceful? Shifting priorities to what truly matters? Feeling supported by those around you? And, getting rid of the crap in your life with skill and confidence? Sign me up! That’s a birth I want to experience.

Okay, I realize that not everyone has such a serene birth experience. I have a friend who was in her late forties when pregnancy caught her and her husband entirely by surprise, since they had needed to try with great dedication to achieve the pregnancy of their first child 10 years earlier. Two weeks after learning she was pregnant, my friend had a miscarriage. They had not planned on a second child; in fact, their first child had a number of challenges his first year that required medical treatment and early

intervention. Yet still, my friend was devastated. She felt her body had betrayed her. Sex, which had been a meaningful way of finding connection and joy with her husband, became a chore she was never interested in. She was left with the question, “What life can be born from this dark womb?”

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” They asked this question as Jesus was just beginning his ministry. Jesus’ own birth story wasn’t nearly as peaceful and serene as nativity scenes portray it. Jesus came into the world unhoused and persecuted. His mom was a young teenager. He was born into a creation that groans and suffers, not to be above it all but rather to be very much a part of it. Jesus tells us about earthly things, so that we can know about heavenly things. But if we cannot understand the earthly things, how can we understand the heavenly things?

When I was about 12, my New-Age stepmother sent me to a Rebirthing seminar for kids, held in the ballroom of a Holiday Inn. My family was in the midst of some chaotic years, so I guess my stepmother wanted me to have this experience as a way to reset and be able to have a new start. Some parents tell their struggling kids to suck it up; other parents with resources send their kids on an Outward Bound experience in Utah; my hippie family gave me a rebirthing seminar in a hotel along an Atlanta interstate. All I remember of that experience was lying on the hotel carpet, alongside a bunch of other children, doing some deep breathing exercises while being guided by someone with a calming voice, and then being part of a debrief session where other children described profound experiences. “What did *you* feel?” the facilitator asked me. I searched my blank mind, trying to grasp for something besides the generic smells of the hotel carpet and the hum of the dimmed, fluorescent lights. “I think I might have felt a pinprick in the arch of my foot?” This comment was met with much rejoicing, as they made quite a big deal of this as a sign of me coming into awareness and sensation in my newly born body. I was skeptical.

Nicodemus might have been just as skeptical as he listened to Jesus tell him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Don’t get me wrong: Nicodemus was already all in when it came to religion. He was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, and he already recognized Jesus’ authority, as he had told 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.” But still, Nicodemus did not know what Jesus meant, and kept pushing him for clarity.

I have cousins who can point to the exact moment in their faith journeys when they were born again. There is a clear before and after, and once they turned their lives over to

Jesus, they will tell you, *everything* was different. To be honest, I am kind of envious of them. Some born-again Christians also have a clear understanding of the end times, a confidence that God will gather them all in a rapturous departure from this flawed earth, so that they can live into some new and bounteous life. I think people like that are less likely to buy into the fear that is around us right now, given our anxieties and vulnerabilities to the virus creeping across the globe and even into our own community. Their religious imagination has prepared them for this, and they simply trust that God is in control.

My faith isn't quite like that. It's not that I haven't dedicated my life over to Jesus. In fact, I do that over and over again, at different points in my faith journey. Sometimes, it feels like an intentional choice, made of loyalty or gratitude. Sometimes, it feels like, "I might as well do this, because the other options don't seem as right for me." But other times, rededicating my life to Jesus feels like falling in love.

As for me, the *concept* of rebirth rings true in my life. I can even point to certain moments in my life when I experienced rebirth that felt very spiritual: Awakening to a call to ministry. Discovering how active God is in the lives of people on the margins. Feeling hope again after witnessing and mourning the traumatic death of my mom. If you think about it, perhaps you have also had moments where you can see there was spiritual rebirth. *But to truly be reborn?* I can't say that I have truly experienced it, at least not with the glory I imagine when Jesus talks about witnessing the Kingdom of God through being born from above. But that doesn't mean I don't believe it will happen. In fact, I am holding out hope that this glory is yet to come, and it will be *spectacular*. If you haven't experienced such glory yet either, take heart. I am going on trust here, but my trust tells me that we haven't seen anything yet. The best is yet to come.

It does not seem that Nicodemus had experienced spiritual rebirth either, at least not in the darkness of the night when he questioned Jesus. And yet, that will not be the last we hear of Nicodemus. He defended Jesus when Jesus was confronted by religious leaders, and showed up again to help take Jesus' broken body from the cross and anoint it with aloe and myrrh. I wonder how much Nicodemus thought of Jesus' words about rebirth as his hands glided ointment over Jesus' lifeless body, swaddled him with burial cloth, and with Joseph of Arimathea, laid him in in a garden tomb. Did Nicodemus know in that moment that the tomb would be for Jesus a dark womb of new birth?

It occurs to me that it is the moment when all control had seeped out of Jesus' body that he was most ready for rebirth. You can't stock up on the circumstances for rebirth. You can't achieve them by being elected Elder or singing in the choir or being the Deacon with the best prayers. You can't line up a schedule for rebirth, fitting it in with getting your work projects done and making it to the gym and still making a healthy dinner for your family. Jesus said, "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."

These words of Jesus tell me that spiritual birth is a gift from God, not a gift that is earned or controlled by us. We only have to be willing to receive it.

Not everyone gives birth. But everyone experiences being born. It is a universal experience we all share, even if we cannot remember it. But let me tell you this: God's plan for salvation is also universal. Jesus said, "For God so loved *the world* that God gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." Too often, Christians have been narrowly focused on the part of "who believes in him" as the condition for salvation. But if they go on to the next verse, they can see: "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." What God offers through Jesus Christ is a gift to all the world, and I don't believe it is based on the condition that people believe in him. It is a gift as generous as a mother pushing a child into the world, and frankly we have no choice in the matter.