

“How To Be Born Anew?”
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March 5, 2023

Often when I am researching sermon ideas, I look to the last time I preached on that scripture, to consider whether the word I preached three years ago, when it last came up in the lectionary, is worth repeating in some form, or if instead the Spirit is prodding me in a different direction.

When I looked at the last time I preached on Nicodemus, I can see I had interviewed Nicole and Cory Lehnbeuter about the birth of Julian, which had just happened, to bring some of the joy of new birth into the sermon. What I hadn't realized then is that that was the Sunday before the pandemic shut *everything* down. We were told it would be for two weeks. We had no clue how much our lives would change. Who among us feels like you are the same as the person you were on March 8, 2020? Talk about rebirth— we have *all* been reborn into a world that is unlike anything we expected.

I remember preparing for giving birth. We had taken a class on natural childbirth. I had read the memoir of Ina May Gaskin, the mother of American midwifery. I did prenatal yoga and acupuncture. We had written up a detailed birth plan, which we presented to my doctor. I remember in one of the birthing classes I took, we were made to hold cubes of ice in our hands, much longer than it felt comfortable, even beyond the point of pain. This was an object lesson to show us that we can make our bodies move beyond pain, and still be okay. As it turns out, holding an ice cube isn't the same as childbirth. I won't go into details, but the actual childbirth—which happened nearly a week after the due date— didn't look much like the birth plan we wrote up.

“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.” We cannot plan for or control the circumstances of our rebirth; we can only open ourselves to receiving the grace of it.

Jesus shared this secret to eternal life in a nighttime interaction with Nicodemus: Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Clothed in the mystery of the nighttime when Nicodemus confronted Jesus with such a question, this idea of being born from above, or born anew, has a mystical meaning to it.

However, we are like Nicodemus, in that we want to pin down the way this happens with a formula. We may ask, like Nicodemus, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”

Christians through the years have pointed to John 3:16 as **the** formula for being reborn: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

The great reformer, Martin Luther, called John 3:16 “the Gospel in a nutshell.” I guess many people agree with Martin Luther, considering how often we see placards saying simply, “John 3:16” displayed at ball games, or in Times Square, or anywhere that will capture the attention of many people all at once. As if to say, “John 3:16, ‘nuff said.” But if John 3:16 is the gospel in a nutshell, how are we to crack open this nut to find the treasure that is within?

Nuts aren’t just for consumption. They are also seeds. They can be planted, deep into the earth, so that with time, and darkness, and nutrient-rich soil, and water, and sunlight, roots will dig deep, a sprout will emerge, thickening with time and care into a sapling, and with even more time and care, it will become a tree that will produce nutshells of its own.

Often these words of Jesus: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life,” get used to shell those who have faith as separate from those who do not, with the implication that God’s love is contained for those who have belief– and as for those who don’t believe, well, one can only imagine how they might perish.

But the thing about nutshells is that they aren’t made to permanently contain the treasure inside. Rather, they are made to burst open and become something else– whether it’s cracked open by a squirrel or a human or other creature, and consumed to nourish their bodies, or it falls to the depths of the earth and the life bursting within it is what cracks it open. God’s love is like that. It’s made to burst open. To feed us. To become something new and regenerative.

There was a time when God’s love for a people was believed to fit only with those whose family tree connected them to Abraham. Long, long ago, God said to Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”

Abraham and Sarah weren’t the last people to leave their country and their kindred to head to a new land, seeking a new blessing. Last week, our church was asked to help to resettle a family from Afghanistan, as they make their new home in Teaneck. You’ll hear more about their specific needs from Emily Haines later in the service, when she gives a Minute for Mission. We know, from a distance, that life became hard when Afghanistan fell back under Taliban rule. We know about girls being forbidden from school, and women forbidden from employment. We have heard about life there, which for several years enjoyed many freedoms, being once again contained, held within a shell.

I don’t think you have to be a Christian to understand the beauty of being born anew, being given a new life.

But we are Christians, and so for us, Jesus remains our testimony and our doorway for rebirth. I can guess that the one whom we know as God has many languages and stories and ways for communicating to other human communities, and cracking open that story of love and life and redemption.

Jesus did that with Nicodemus. He reminded Nicodemus— a Jew— of a Torah story, from the Exodus when the Hebrews were wandering with Moses through the dangerous wilderness, and they were grumpy and not trusting God. Not only that, the Hebrews kept encountering poisonous serpents. Many of the people were bitten and died. God had told Moses to carve a serpent of bronze and put it on a wooden pole. Anyone who was bitten by a serpent would look at Moses' pole with the bronze serpent on it. And they would not die.

It's such an obscure story to reference. But you should realize that although this conversation comes before Jesus' crucifixion and death, John's gospel was written over 50 years after Jesus had been crucified and died. Many who had heard about Jesus were also still holding on to the trauma of the brutal way that he had died. The cross— a sign of Roman execution which would have still been familiar to John's initial audience— loomed large, so large that it threatened to overwhelm the good news of Jesus' story.

By reminding Nicodemus— and John's readers— of another story where the thing they most feared would be the thing that could save their lives, Jesus is preparing his listeners to know that death is not the scariest thing; for in Jesus, death can lead to new life.

“...whoever believes in him will have eternal life.” But for some of you, believing is a hard sell. There are those of you who come here because you like how this community behaves— our care for one another, our concern for justice and service to the outside world; our sense of welcome. Belonging is also nice. It feels good to have a community of varied ages and experiences that comes together in a public experience of worship. It feels good to have a Deacon check in on you. It feels good to have a place where you can bring your trials and your triumphs and know there are people who want to share that journey with you. It feels good to belong. But **believe**? If there is going to be a litmus test to be here, then I am out, many of you might say. If it's either believe, or perish, then I'm not sure I fit in this nutshell.

“In her 2013 book, *Christianity after Religion*, historian Diana Butler Bass points out that the English word 'believe' comes from the German 'belieben' — the German word for love. To believe is not to hold an opinion. To believe is to treasure. To hold something beloved. To give my heart over to it without reservation. To believe in something is to invest it with my love.”
(From Debie Thomas, *Journey with Jesus*)

Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus has no ending here in John. The story doesn't end with Nicodemus shouting joyfully, “I believe! My life is made new!” Perhaps he just slipped back into the night's darkness. But that's not the last we hear of Nicodemus. He shows up again to defend Jesus when the authorities come after him, and finally to anoint Jesus' body with aloe and myrrh after he died, treasuring Jesus, and holding him as beloved with this tender act of care. Slowly then, it seems that that nutshell has cracked open in Nicodemus and has sprouted in him.

For God so loved the world. It's not a formula. It's a mystical truth, a question in the night, a love cracked open. May that story take root in you, and bring you life.