

2nd Sunday of Lent
3.1.26

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 unless God is with that person.” 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 the 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.” (372)

At my ecclesiastical council, someone said something strange that has stayed with me ever since.

An ecclesiastical council: this is the final step for a student in care, someone moving toward ordination. This comes after you’ve finished your theological and also your clinical pastoral education, after you’ve finished the internships and psychological evaluation. All the interviews and courses are complete. The transcripts sit in the file, those grades once so important and ever after to be forgotten. Writing the ordination paper is the grand penultimate feat, and then delivering it to an ecclesiastical council, all the association’s clergy and delegates and whomever among the laity would also like to come. You read it, they ask questions or make comments, and if all goes well you’re deemed ready to be ordained pending a call to a church or some other authorized ministry.

My ecclesiastical council was at my home church in North Hampton, New Hampshire. I delivered my ordination paper, reading it aloud or perhaps parts of it aloud. People asked questions, made comments, among which was this one, neither really a question nor a straight-up comment. "I can't figure out if you're a cradle Christian or a born-again Christian."

I was happy to hear it, but surprised as well—that these are thought to be mutually exclusive. To borrow from the internet meme, can't it be both?

The notion of being born again comes from this passage and only this passage. The notion of it shows up explicitly only here, in the Gospel of John, only here, in this nighttime exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee who was probably very comfortable in the how-to of it all, who was probably surprised that something so very beyond his control was required in order to see and indeed be amidst the kingdom of God: to be born again, to be born of the spirit.

Nonetheless, it's become a central commandment for a lot of people's understanding of Christianity. To be born again: the central event for whether or not you're actually a Christian. All those signs in all those crowded bleachers at those rowdy football games? "John 3:16." Those are to indicate this: that "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." And what it means to believe in him, to have sure access to this eternal life, is to become born again. You have to be born again.

Which is a strange commandment because it's not as if you have much control over being born, certainly not the first time and therefore likely not any subsequent times. Really, if ever there were anything any of us do over which we have absolutely no control it's being born. So why Jesus would choose this as the operating metaphor for this apparently singularly important commandment is a mystery, if not a cruelty. It's almost as if this was never intended as a commandment but as a possibility Nicodemus should open himself to, a promise he should turn his face toward. This wouldn't be an act of willpower, or personal choosing, or obedient and impressive righteousness; this would be the action of God that Nicodemus, or perhaps anyone, any of us even, might open ourselves to, turn our faces toward, sunflower blossoms turning on their stalks toward the sun.

I recently brought some houseplants. Two of them have pink splotches on their otherwise green leaves. The little cards they came with said the pink splotches become most saturated the more the plants get direct sun. This winter, these days: I've been dashing the plants along the south-facing windows of my house, trying to catch those brief moments of actual sunshine. We'll see if those splotches respond.

To be precise, though, it's not actually that you must be born again but that you must be born from above, indeed born of the Spirit. That said, Nicodemus did seem to hear it as being born again, taking quite the literal tack. After all, he asked, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" He seems to have heard the emphasis less on this as a birth to come from above or from the Spirit, more that it be a second birth, and indeed a birth very much like the first one. Redundant.

Which is probably a testament to who Nicodemus was in the world. A Pharisee, he was probably well learned in the law, and thus very at home with the sense that God is in the words of the Law, making faithfulness to God be a matter of adherence to the Law, and making God's faithfulness to us a matter of issuing forth commandments, rather than (for example) promising presence. In order to know God, you should know the Law whose reality is manifest in commandments of the Law. In order to be close with God, you should be obedient to the Law. There was something very literal about his understanding, if literalism of an ancient sort.

And yet he came to Jesus, Jesus who had inflamed more than a few Pharisees and who would yet inflame more than a few Pharisees, Jesus who had little interest in what made Pharisees tick. Jesus even said that man wasn't made for the Law but that the Law was made for man, which means the needs of the human and of humanity were more crucial than the needs of the Law—as if the Law should conform to humanity and not that humanity should conform to the Law,

which isn't quite the unproblematic assertion we might take it to be. People do need *some* discipline in order simply to live together, to survive together, not to become lonely monsters. We do need to conform, each of us, to *some* limits, to some accountability. When people act as if accountable to no one and nothing, we're in dangerous territory. We know this too well.

What's more, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night—as if not to be seen in the plain light of day, as if to keep unseen his curiosity, if not indeed his yearning.

Yearning: have you ever reached a point of mastery where you wonder whether there's anything beyond what you're so suddenly comfortable with, indeed hoped there's something beyond your even hard-won success? You can finally do all the things you've striven to be able to do. Now what?

Let's suppose Nicodemus was a really successful Pharisee. He was good at interpreting, understanding, and guiding others by the Law. He was very good at helping people live within its mysterious, life-giving, pro-social dictates. This, which made life together possible; this, which constrained destructive behaviors and made way for behaviors that made for human flourishing; he knew all of this, had deployed all of this. People had enjoyed his guidance, had lived well by his gracious hand.

So...

is this all? Is this the all-in-all?

I've recently become aware of a colleague who's leaving parish ministry. After thirty-three years of successful parish work, first on the East Coast then on the West, she's moving on to become a psychedelic-supported spiritual care provider. This is the phrase she used in the letter of resignation she sent to her congregation and then (for reasons that aren't *unproblematic*) posted it on her Facebook page. This all came up as a matter for conversation at my clergy group, first the Facebook presence and then, more interestingly, the psychedelic spiritual work, which I then learned more about online, watching an informational presentation she conducted on Zoom and then posted on YouTube.

This phenomenon, this social trend, was also featured in *The New Yorker* last spring, an article Michael Pollan wrote: "This is Your Priest on Drugs." Psychedelics turn out to have restorative power. For veterans suffering combat trauma, for people with eating disorders and other addictions, psychedelics have appeared promising in ways little else has. Not studied in any formal way nearly enough, these should be studied. We as a society should seek some conclusion about what, if anything, these are good for—for they might be powerfully good.

They also might be less pressingly good, but still good for less traumatized people. For people boxed in, for people whose thinking is boxed in by modern limits or whose

spirits are hemmed in by what we've been told is the real world. Of course, this "real world" seems to have foreclosed on so much that in previous epochs have been felt as entirely real, realms of mystery and wonder, realms of beauty to be seen and heard and sensed in our longing hearts. For access to these wonders, psychedelics might present an opening door where there'd been but previously a locked cell, and one sworn to be all there is.

I'll admit, I'm not entirely convinced. I've never found drugs all that interesting, never experimented with them myself. Not quite a narc, I've never been *against* them, just never myself been curious *about* them or drawn to them. My quip about it all is that I have a tenuous enough grasp on the known world that I don't think drugs would do me well. It's a joke but it's also true.

And in the context of this new conversation about it all I'd say the same thing but with a different spirit. I already have this, to a degree that I'm grateful for and not feeling in need for any greater degree of intensity or edginess. But why would I deny this to someone else? Why would I deny someone else to walk through this door which has been closed and locked to them but which swings open for me—if not always as an easy benefit?

I mean, I'm more comfortable with the pressing reality of God than I often am with the pressing reality of my peer group.

Oh well.

I didn't get asked out on a lot of dates.

I'd still rather be a pastor. I'd still rather be a pastor than a psychedelic-supported spiritual care provider. I'd still rather speak to and for and with and among a church that has turned this gracious description ("You must be born again and from above") into a command, has become grounds to compete about who's the more legitimate Christian and who still hasn't done what's required. I guess I'm as interested in the public imperatives this impossible faith presses upon us as I am in the personal, private experiences any of us might have to confirm the reality of God above, within, and among God's creation, this beloved, sinful, unfinished world.

The private experiences of the reality of this God, which Nicodemus sought and which much of the Gospel of John focuses on (private experiences, one-to-one encounters), can be profound and compelling and private to the degree that many seem closed out from it. I grieve this. But likewise the public demands of the reality of this God

are also great—and indeed are greater now more than ever, or maybe now as ever. The church book club recently finished a short book that called Christians back to a more pro-social public witness. It's a book that ultimately unsatisfied most of us but the premise was good: that liberal democracy of the sort that is the United States was born of Christian faith and practice. These two, while separated by the important church-state boundary, are in alignment—or should be.

Some factions of the church have abandoned this alignment. These noisiest factions have chosen to strive after political power more than faithfulness to a crucified Lord—and this writer would like them to come back. Though not a Christian, though not a believer in the reality of God, he would like them, would like us, to come back. Turns out, he likes what we did for the wider world.

Not looking to do what other people have set out for me to do (my to-do list is long enough, thank you very much) I don't mind doing what he wants me to do because I'd have done it anyway. Really, I wish he'd taken a closer look at those of us who never left, those of us largely in historical congregations who've always practiced our faith *and* our democracy. But he's not wrong that we're in a tattered place as a society.

And now we're at war.

Much remains to be seen about that.

I wish I could trust our political leadership, but I don't.

I do, however, trust Jesus as the manifest presence of God in the world, showing us the way to abundant life, which way is self-giving. And I do trust the God whom he made manifest and amidst whose real presence we are to enter, join, and live out. I trust the Holy Spirit who makes all this possible, born in us that we might be born in Spirit.

Thanks be to these.