



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent I

[RCL] Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

Born From Above

The Gospel of John is written in sweeping poetry: The author speaks of light and dark, flesh and spirit, above and below. These themes come together in a unique way in the story of Nicodemus. We meet Nicodemus at night—and *there* is some heavy symbolism right from the start. He is already “in the dark” when he introduces himself to Jesus; you can almost hear the anxiety in his voice.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee—a movement of Jewish leaders who emphasized a rigorous interpretation of the Law. The Pharisees wanted to make religious practice accessible and clear, to offer understandable guidelines for people so that they would know how to show devotion to God. (The Apostle Paul was a Pharisee.) Now Pharisees are often portrayed by the Gospel writers as ready-made counter examples to Jesus, since they are at the heart of the religious establishment he is testing. It’s important to remember, however, that if Jesus seems to argue with them all the time, that might have more to do with his *respect* for them than his *disdain*. They are, simply put, very faithful. And the movement that was gathering around Jesus was not behaving in the right way, according to their interpretation of faithfulness.

Nicodemus, even if he comes at night, is risking something in approaching Jesus: the disapproval of his colleagues as well as the skepticism of the Jesus movement. But he is just too interested to let it go. Something in Nicodemus is drawn to Jesus.

From the start, he wants Jesus to know that he means well: “We know you come from God,” he says. We know the signs you are doing must be from God. You couldn’t do it otherwise.

In response, Jesus seems to go in a different direction. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Could Jesus be commending Nicodemus for his understanding? It might be that Jesus is saying to Nicodemus: “you wouldn’t know this unless God were with you. You get it!”

Unfortunately, it seems that Nicodemus sails right past this commendation and gets stuck: Born from above? What could that mean?

Rather than let the metaphor stand, Nicodemus takes it as literally as possible: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Nicodemus is puzzling this out in a very “apples vs. oranges” kind of way. He is trying to use geometry to solve a poem, trying to use an axe to cut off a slice of bread. He is, as Jesus later puts it, not understanding “the earthly” and therefore not having any chance whatsoever of getting at “the heavenly.”

For Jesus, being born from above means being born of the Spirit, claimed by the Holy One, the Lord. Being born from above is about releasing the assumptions of the world, receiving eyes to see and ears to hear a reality bigger than what’s right in front of you.

Born from above, you see the longing of God for liberation and healing for all people. Born from above, you see how the categories and judgments of the world have no ultimate sway. Born from above, you are changed and given the gift of God’s true freedom.

Jesus, doesn’t just move the goal posts here, he changes the game entirely. His response is an invitation into deepest wonder and awe at the reality of God’s love: a love so wild and incredible that God’s own beloved child is given to the world, so everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. The gift of this life is so persistent, so alive, that it lasts forever.

“Everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” The question must be asked; what does it mean to believe in God’s Son, Jesus? Does it mean believing things *about* Jesus, like a theological litmus test? Is it how you act? What you think?

In the Gospel of John, belief in Jesus Christ simply means having a relationship with Jesus Christ. This truth comes through in story after story. It’s not about a grand confession of orthodoxy. Not about perfect behavior. Certainly not about spending time only with the right people. To be in relationship with Jesus Christ means to be open to this joy and wonder. To be in relationship with Jesus Christ means knowing that no one is outside the reach of his love. And to be in Christ’s love is to have eternal life, to live in that promise forever: a promise so strong that even death cannot hold sway.

Just in case it’s still unclear, Jesus continues: “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 a gift is this verse in John 3:17! Can you imagine what Christianity might look like if we were all people of John 3:17 as much as John 3:16?

Indeed...this message is not about condemnation. It is about salvation: saving everyone.

The son of God came for everyone. No matter what.

That’s the other important thing about this passage: the Greek word used here in “loved the world” is *kosmos*—as in: Everyone. Everywhere. Everything.

Jesus did not come to condemn or dismiss or separate. Jesus came—and comes to us still—to make visible God’s love and forgiveness. Our Gospel text, along with our Old Testament passage, invites us to give

ourselves and our lives to the Savior who calls us into a new way of life and a new trust in God. We are called to trust God, as Abraham did, with our whole lives, hearts, and minds. With our wallets, our cars, our choices about how we spend our time.

Follow the God of Abraham, who told him that he would be a blessing, that the whole world would be blessed through him. Leave your kindred and your logic and your usual ways of thinking. Just go. Allow yourself to be born again.

That's what the real work of Lent is: this work of opening to new birth.

The Lenten season begins on Ash Wednesday with an uncompromising look at our vulnerability, our frailty, our sin. But that's just one day; the whole season is about how we allow ourselves to be found by God, how we allow ourselves to be changed by—as the writer of First Corinthians names—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

What are the things in your life that “do not exist?”

What could God be calling out of you?

What does being “born from above” mean in your life, and how is God midwifing that newness in this moment?

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