



“Labor and Delivery”

a sermon by

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Our text this afternoon comes from 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 apart from the presence of God.” 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 a 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.”

Nicodemus comes as a clandestine visitor to Jesus in the night. Different scholars posit different interpretations of his intentions. He’s a prominent guy- a very well educated Jew- a Pharisee, in fact- and a member of the Sanhedrin- Israel’s version of the Supreme Court. Jesus had just caused quite a scene in the temple during the biggest holiday season of the year- the season of Passover- pitching a fit and turning over the tables of those exchanging money so the people could buy animals to offer sacrifice. Some suggest that Nicodemus was coming to see if Jesus was going to play nice, and so in a backhanded kind of a way he comes on behalf of ‘we’ whoever ‘we’ is and says, ‘we know that you are a teacher who has come from God’- to try to see if Jesus will fit in his pocket or not. But others portray Nicodemus as an authentic seeker of his faith, and this is the interpretation that I like the most. Nicodemus is a devout and intelligent man. He had heard Jesus’ teachings, had seen his miracles, and he has deduced based on his experience of him that Jesus is from God.

That’s the logical conclusion. Nicodemus is passionate about the Hebrew law, quite clearly. Why would he not be a seeker- and his search has yielded these results that have brought him- in the night probably to protect himself- to Jesus’ doorstep- to share this news with our Lord that he’s figured it out and perhaps see how he would respond. But rather than offering approval to Nicodemus, Jesus pushes presses him. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus, in fact, has not figured it out- he’s too stuck in his head. His approach is too cerebral, in a sense, and Jesus is right because Nicodemus clearly doesn’t get it- ‘so what are we

supposed to do, reenter the womb?’ he asks, maybe a little sarcastically. I’ve seen the signs, they point to you, what more do you want?

We hear this phrase, ‘to be born again’, and, as one commentator notes, forget that it was ever once a new concept. The phrase has been used in a lot of different ways and is heavy laden with associations and convictions. But as Frederic Buechner points out, we tend to use this phrase as a formula for salvation, as if it were completely in our hands. Being ‘born again’, we have come to believe, is something that we can make happen- like brownies- if we just follow the recipe. Nicodemus had followed the recipe right to Jesus’ door. We’ve seen what you’ve done, we’ve heard what you’ve said. Those things together point to the fact that you are from God- formula complete, recipe for belief and presumably salvation a success so we can turn down the heat now.

But Jesus pushes back. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above...no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Jesus acknowledges Nicodemus’ desire to have all the articles of his belief worked out- and tells this sophisticated seeker that his ability to enter the kingdom is solely dependent on two things that, try as he might, simply can’t be held in his hands. Water and Spirit, “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 are not the source of our faith. Only God is. We cannot reason or deduce the Spirit into our hearts any more than we can cause the wind to blow, but you could open a window perhaps to feel it. Water cannot be carried around in a fist, it’s currents may be channeled but cannot be dictated- it will tumble and swirl and splash as it will. Babies don’t decide to be born. There is nothing that they can do to come into this world except perhaps to surrender to the process of being born. And so it is, Jesus says, with us.

There is no birth narrative in John, but Jesus does tell the story of the birth of a Christian. The only labor associated with it seems to be in our struggle to understand that it is not about us. And the delivery Christ offers is radical freedom in the Spirit- freedom from having to figure it out, freedom from trying to earn our way into the kingdom, freedom from carrying the weight of our salvation on our shoulders, freedom from thinking that we are responsible for conveying the grace that the waters of baptism signify, freedom from having to win God’s favor- freedom from fear- all of this- like Spirit and water, like bread and cup, body broken and blood poured out, stone rolled away, and Christ ascended to secure a place for us with God- all of it is given to us as pure gift alone. God’s mercy is out of our hands because it is in our hearts. Christ doesn’t want Nicodemus to get his mind around it, just to open his heart to it. To set aside his labor, and be delivered into the loving arms of the Father. That, he says, is how you enter the kingdom.

Nicodemus appears in two more times in the rest of the gospel. In the first, he rises to Jesus’ defense before the Sanhedrin when his fellow attorney priests tried to entrap him. And his final appearance is, I think you will agree, significant and telling about his own

journey after that night. Quote: "Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there."

To handle the body of Christ is to know that our lives are not our own. And it is to acknowledge with sobriety and deep gratitude that the gift of God's grace- like water and Spirit- will never be in our hands, but is always within reach thanks to our loving Savior who meets us in the darkness of our sin and brings us into marvelous light. Amen.