

Sermon (5/27/18, John 3: 1-17):

John Buchanan, former publisher of Christian Century, shares a story about a time when he baptized a toddler at the church he served. After the baptism, he anointed the child's head with oil while saying, 'Child of the covenant, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.' With that, the child blurted out a loud and audible, 'Uh-Oh!'

There's something to be said for that child's response. There is something powerful that happens when Jesus grabs a hold of us. Even when the discomfort he causes can be quite acute, it's impossible to completely squirm out of his grasp. We might try to scrub the mark of that cross off our foreheads, but it is permanent. Every pool of water we look into, reveals the reflection of the one whom God has declared to be God's Beloved.

'Uh-oh!' said the little child. In today's passage, Nicodemus is about to find out what that little child meant.

Today's story is one of those that we tend to know or, at least, think we know and there is a danger when that happens even, and maybe especially, for us preachers. At first glance, we tend to believe that we have this one all figured out and there really isn't anything new or, at least, important for us to learn and remember. We come to this passage with a lot of baggage.

First, the passage opens with this, '...there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus.' Watch-out, we think. We know about those conniving Pharisees. We know how they feel threatened by Jesus. We know they will take advantage of every opportunity to trick and discredit Jesus. We know they will even have a hand in Jesus' crucifixion.

Pharisee equals bad guy. Surely, Nicodemus must be up to something dastardly.

Secondly, it's nighttime. Good things never happen in the night. The sound of footsteps and snapping twigs is a sure sign of danger. Scary movies are at their scariest when the dark of night settles in. It's the time of day when monsters come out of their hiding places and criminals do their bidding. Darkness, along with eerie music, is a sure signal that something awful is about to happen.

Nicodemus coming to Jesus and the disciples at night, can't be good, right?

Thirdly, this is a story where Jesus says, 'You must be born again'. Oh my! Run away! We've heard this phrase way too many times. It's overused and, sadly, often abused. We've seen it used as a litmus test to measure our salvation status. It's been the measuring stick we've been asked to stand next to, to see if we are good enough to ride the fantastic ride of redemption. 'Have you been born again?' What does that really mean? Some seem to think they have it all figured out.

We come to this story with a lot of baggage, a lot of preconceived notions that can become barriers to our hearing its message with a fresh newness.

In a way, we see in Nicodemus a progression of faith that many of us make.

It begins with curiosity. Cautious but deliberate curiosity. What makes Nicodemus's curiosity complicated, however, is that he is a Pharisee. A teacher and public figure. A person who would be easily recognized. He was an educated expert on God's law. An enlightened one. The person whom others would seek out for answers not so much a person who would be sneaking around in the darkness with questions to ask a rogue Rabbi who, to many, was better at breaking God's law than keeping it.

'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.' Nicodemus says to Jesus upon meeting him. Jesus' response is far from gentle, which feels odd when we consider what our response would be to a curious outsider.

It doesn't happen often, but a curious visitor is one whom we would bend over backwards to make them feel welcome. Great care would be taken in how we respond to their questions so as to not put them off. Gentle hospitality would be offered in the hope they might return. Few things are more satisfying, more encouraging, more hopeful for a church these days than a curious visitor.

This is not what we see in Jesus' response to Nicodemus. Jesus is

abrupt and direct. Perhaps, it's because it's late and Jesus is tired. Perhaps, Nicodemus had startled them by his visit during a time when they were ready to rest. Whatever the case, Jesus jumps in with both feet to push Nicodemus to a new place.

'No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above!' He tells Nicodemus.

We can only imagine the confused look that must have come over Nicodemus's face. 'Born from above? What does that mean?' Nicodemus interprets Jesus' words literally. Entering the womb and starting again.

What would it be like to start again? To go back in time and start over. Would we choose the professions we are in now? Would we be living in another part of the world? What would life look like for us?

CBS periodically does these 'Note to Your Younger Self' segments where someone is asked to write a letter to their younger self. These letters are then shared on this news segment. Some of those who have written these letters include Jimmy Carter, Joe Biden, astronaut Peggy Whitson, Sen. Tammy Duckworth, Oprah, and Maya Angelo. One of the late-night comedy hosts recently shared what he would write. It would be 18-16-24-36-5, he said, today's winning lottery numbers.

Of course, none of those younger selves will read those letters because that's just not the way life works. We know that. Nicodemus knew that.

Nicodemus takes Jesus' words literally, wondering how anyone could ever enter their mother's womb and start again.

It soon becomes a conversation where Nicodemus and Jesus talk past each other. Nicodemus interprets Jesus' words literally while Jesus intends for his words to be understood metaphorically.

It would be unfair for us to be too hard on Nicodemus as this is the way he had been trained to think. Calculating exact measures of what one must do to keep the letter of the law. Dispensing step by step prescriptions on how to live within the parameters of God's covenant.

Perhaps this is one of the places where Nicodemus needed to be born anew. Perhaps he needed to experience the shock of being birthed into a

new place where God's relationship with us is not reduced to a measurement of rules kept and violated. Perhaps he needed to be reborn into a world where words can be used metaphorically to lyrically describe a God who is difficult to understand and impossible to quantify. A God whose mystery is as much a part of God's being as the law he gave to Moses.

Born again. Birth is not something we have a lot of control over. Suddenly, miraculously, we exist. It begins with the multiplying of cells in our mother's womb. Slowly, we take on the shape of a tiny human being. After nine months, we are suddenly thrust into the world. The timing of that birth, the place where we land, the arms that cradle us, the people who will nurture us are all things that are beyond our control.

Spiritual birth is like the wind. It blows where it chooses. There are no special words we can say to provoke its action. We are dependent upon the Spirit for this birth, this new thing God wants to do in and through us, this overhaul God wants to initiate in our lives.

Sometimes this sorely overused and misused phrase might lead us to think that we're doing something wrong because we don't quite measure up to 'Born again' status. My read on this, however, is that we are at the mercy of the Spirit's choosing. We can control the time, the place, and the when of our spiritual birth as much as we can control our own physical birth. Yet, when the Spirit does choose, there is no stopping it anymore than we can stop a physical birth once it has begun. It will overtake us like the wind. It will thrust us into a new place. It will feel like birth.

I will never forget the look on my daughter's face when I held her for the first time. She did not cry. Instead, she struggled to open her eyes to look around. The bright lights of the operating room made it difficult for her to see, but through her squinting eyes she was determined to take in as much as she could of this brand-new world she had been thrust into. Everything was new.

Being born of the Spirit means seeing things in a brand-new way and sometimes that is hard. It means learning that the ways of the world might not be the ways of God. It means discovering that things that were acceptable to us before are no more. It means seeing the world in new

ways – without the borders we are normally so good at creating. It means seeing faces in a new way – as reflections of God’s image. It means realizing that love is not just for those we like but also for our enemies. It means seeing ourselves as God the parent sees us, beloved and treasured. It means discovering that grace is way more powerful than we ever thought it could be. Birth is hard. Not only is everything unfamiliar but it means we need to learn how to walk and see and move and navigate in this new world. It feels like starting again and many times that is not good news for us. It feels like trading in the safe and comfortable space of the womb for a life we did not choose but a life that is, none the less, now ours.

I think on that night, when the cautious Nicodemus set out to look for Jesus, the sound of the Spirit crying out in pain as she gave birth to Nicodemus must have been in the air. Nicodemus’s first days began with curiosity much like my daughter’s squinting eyes struggled to take in this odd and strange world she had been born into. Hobbling along on his new-found legs, Nicodemus set out to understand what this new life meant.

This would not be the last we see of Nicodemus. Later in John we find him again. This time it is not under the cover of night. This time he is not afraid of what the other Pharisees think. This time it is in broad daylight and this time he is defending Jesus, reprimanding his fellow Pharisees for wanting to arrest Jesus. Nicodemus had grown up. He now sees the world for what it is, which means he also sees it for what it is not – namely a place that does not welcome the new that Jesus brings.

We also find Nicodemus at the end of John’s Gospel, assisting Joseph of Arimathea with the burial of Jesus’ body. Nicodemus was the one who performed the traditional burial ritual of anointing his body with myrrh and aloes and then wrapping it in linen. An old ritual given new meaning in the new world that Nicodemus now lived in.

‘Uh-oh’ said the child who had been welcomed into the family of God. ‘Uh-oh’ is probably a good description of what it means when this Jesus gets under our skin. There’s no going back and learning how to navigate this new world the Spirit births us into is no easy task. Even so, it is gift. A most magnificent gift called life as it was truly meant to be.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

## Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

***People: And also with you.***

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious and loving God, we pray this day for the blowing of your Spirit even as we share a sense of anxiety about its arrival. We know that it will challenge us. We know that it will show us things we have not seen before. We know that it will point us in new directions. We know it will feel like birth where the familiar and comfortable must be left behind so that the new, your new, might become our home.

Even so, we pray for your Spirit, O God, because we know we need rebirth.

We have grown weary of the old where fear has such control over our lives and violence seems to have become a way of life. We have grown weary of the old where governmental structures have become more about preserving control and power than being a servant that seeks to do the good and right thing even when it is hard. We have grown weary of the old where our elderly often feel isolated by their frailty and our children struggle with severe anxiety and depression. We have grown weary of the old where we often feel alone and on our own in our efforts to be caregivers of those whom we love. We have grown weary of the old where work places often feel like they have lost their heart and their way. We have grown weary of the old where nations rise up against nations because they are unwilling to seek compromise for the sake of peace and risk gracious generosity so that all might have a chance to live. We have grown weary of the old where stark divides separate us, blinding us to the common humanity we all share.

This weekend, O Lord, we are especially mindful of the horrific cost of war as we remember the many lives that have been lost in our global battles. We also remember our veterans, including those who still bear the physical and emotional wounds of war.

We need rebirth, O God. Please send your Spirit. We ask this as we especially remember those who are ill, frail, worried, despondent, angry, hurt, and broken. We especially pray for these whom we now mention either silently or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

***All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.***

***Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.***