

## Second Sunday in Lent Year A

### Digging Into Our Certainty

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

*“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.”*

Martin Luther called John 3:16 “the Gospel in a nutshell.”

Without a doubt, this is the most famous verse in the New Testament. And yet, as most preachers know all too well, the more popular a Biblical text is, the harder it is to preach! Such is the case here.

The popularity of John 3:16 has, in a sense, robbed it of its power. Far from the “heart of the Gospel,” it now seems like nothing more than Christianity’s catchphrase—the logo of the Christian brand.

John 3:16 pops up on tee shirts, on bumper stickers, on billboards, on Facebook, and (most annoying of all) on those little pamphlets that get wedged into the screen door on Saturday mornings! It’s the equivalent of the community choir singing Handel’s “Messiah” at Christmas: much-appreciated, well-loved, but just a bit taxing to hear recited over and over and over again in exactly the same way time after time after time.

But there’s another, more dangerous side to John 3:16 that cannot be overlooked.

Regardless of what we make of this text’s familiarity, the truth of the matter is that John 3:16 has been used time and time again in Christian history to hurt, divide, and demean people. For some, the requirement that we “be born again” is code for “you have to look, sound, and act like us.”

The Gospel becomes a proof-text by which we determine if other people’s salvation is as certain as ours is. From this vantage point, the text loses its transformative power altogether and becomes a weapon to re-enforce a particular worldview.

As is the case with the whole of Scripture, when we read John 3:16 apart from its larger context, we run the risk of missing the point. John 3:16 isn’t a theological maxim in and of itself; rather, it is part of a much richer conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus, says John’s Gospel, was a leader among the Jews. In public, Nicodemus’s loyalties were clearly devoted to the Jewish establishment. But in private, Nicodemus had his doubts. And so, he visits Jesus under the cover of nightfall.

“Rabbi,” Nicodemus says, “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.”

To put it another way, Nicodemus saw that Jesus was clearly mediating the presence of God, and Nicodemus wanted that kind of experience, too.

Then, as Jesus so often does, he says something that utterly astounds everyone: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.”

In other words, glimpsing the Kingdom of God isn’t a matter of praying a certain way or believing a certain way or following a certain set of liturgical customs; it’s about a complete rebirth of our entire existence!

On hearing this, Nicodemus asks an honest albeit naïve question that sounds funny to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears: “How can an old man like me go back into my mother’s womb and be born again?”

Nicodemus makes what is perhaps the most common mistake when it comes to reading and interpreting Scripture: confusing something meant as metaphor with something meant to be literally true.

Like all of us, Nicodemus had already been born once into both a physical and a spiritual context: He was born into a Pharisaic Jewish home, with all the customs and traditions of the day.

But this second birth that Jesus is talking about comes not from below—with all the physical and visceral mechanisms of childbirth—but from above.

So how do we do that?

More than saying the right prayers or professing the right statement of faith, being born from above is about a way of life. It’s about living so that those around you will see you and know about Jesus.

For Nicodemus, being born from above happened slowly. The Gospel of John tells us that he came to Jesus under the cover of nightfall. He wasn’t quite sure he believed just yet. He didn’t want anyone to recognize him.

Then, after he leaves Jesus, he returns to his position among the Jewish establishment. His conversion doesn’t happen with a bolt of lightning or sudden blindness; it doesn’t draw the same kind of attention that the Apostle Paul’s conversion does; and there’s no incredible dream that converts or upends Nicodemus’s life like the dreams of Saint Peter or Saint John the Divine.

But deep down, and ever so slightly, something begins to turn.

Nicodemus’s rebirth happens over the course of a long journey, which began under the cover of darkness when he took a chance on Jesus. He was an uncertain, fly-by-night, wanna-be disciple.

And the truth is, with the exception of one brief mention in John chapter 7, we never hear from Nicodemus again—that is, until the end of John’s Gospel. And it is here that Nicodemus’s birth from above is laid bare.

As Jesus hangs crucified, after all of the other disciples had fled for fear of persecution, there stands Nicodemus at the foot of the cross, armed with myrrh and aloes and the other provisions for Jewish burial, ready to bear the broken and lifeless body of the crucified Lord to its grave.

Jesus said, “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.”

We can never fully know what Nicodemus was thinking as he departed Jesus’ company after hearing these words. But we can be sure that something within him began to turn. And then, little by little, his heart was broken open and he was born anew, finding his way through darkness and doubt, to the cross.

In his poem, “From the Place Where We Are Right,” the great German-born Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai put it this way:

From the place where we are right  
flowers will never grow  
in the Spring.

The place where we are right  
is hard and trampled  
like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
dig up the world  
like a mole, a plough.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
where the ruined  
house once stood.<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of this Lenten journey, may we allow our doubts and questions to dig into our certainty. May we be broken open by a love that evades even our wildest imagining until, at last, we come to the foot of the cross.

Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Yehuda Amichai, “The Place Where We Are Right” in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, edited & translated from Hebrew by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (University of California Press, 1996).

*Written by The Rev. Marshall A. Jolly. Jolly is the rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Morganton, North Carolina. He studied at Transylvania University (BA, American Studies) and Emory University's Candler School of Theology (MDiv & Certificate in Anglican Studies). His published work includes essays on Christian social engagement, theology in the public square, and preaching, appearing most recently in the Journal of Appalachian Studies and the Anglican Theological Review. He is the editor of Modern Metanoia, a preaching resource authored by Millennials, and enjoys exploring the nearby Appalachian foothills with his wife Elizabeth.*

*Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. © 2017 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.*