

**“Climb Back into the Womb” John 3:1-17 Rev. Michele Ward
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‘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.’ John 3:16-17

John 3:16-17 are some of the most co-opted verses in the Bible. We have all seen them on street signs, memorized these verses, tried to understand their puzzling meaning. These verses are set to music, as you just heard. They are printed onto t-shirts, posters, bumper stickers, billboards, journals, and magnets. They become a symbol for some Christians of their rock solid belief and unwavering faith. They become a weapon to shame others when they do not believe ‘the right way.’ The gospel is good news, not a bludgeon.

If these verses have ever been used to harm or shame you, we can try to take them back this morning. We can try to reclaim them together. If these verses are laughable to you because they seem anti intellectual or out of place with your , But Jesus did not intend for us to reduce John 3:16-17 into a formula for salvation. John writes this account of a prominent religious leader spending all night with Jesus in order to reveal the uncertainty of faith. And the real difficulty with this passage is that we are left with more questions than answers at the end of it. We are left in the dark with Nicodemus as he tries to figure out what in the world Jesus is asking of him.

First, we learn that Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leaders, meets Jesus at night. In fact, the NRSV tells us that Nicodemus comes over to the house where Jesus is sleeping and asks him questions. What we don’t get in this exchange is the story of how Nicodemus got into the house, thought. I imagine he was banging on the door [knocking], waking up the neighbors in his stage whisper [Jesus! Are you in there? It’s me, Nicodemus], I imagine he wakes Jesus up, startles him in mid-dream. I imagine Nicodemus sneaking into the house, breaking and entering, so desperate to keep his presence a secret. I can see him nervously walking over the the house where Jesus sleeps, wondering if anyone will see him on the street. Nicodemus was taking a risk to talk to Jesus, this radical rabbi with the power to heal. And yet, Nicodemus was compelled to come and wrestle with God all night for answers to his questions, just like Jacob did so long ago.

Jesus does not turn Nicodemus away. I don’t know about you, but I’d rather not be woken up in the middle of the night by someone seeking answers to questions I could probably answer much better during the daytime when my brain was a little more functional. Thankfully, Jesus does not respond the way

most of us would. Rather, Jesus talks with him. He talks with him all night, trying to answer his questions.

Nicodemus admits that he believes in the power that Jesus has to heal people and believes that it comes from God. Jesus tells him that no one can see the Kingdom of Heaven without being born [from above.] Most popular quotes use the phrase 'born again' here, but the Greek work *anōthen* can either mean again, above, or anew. This is where the phrase 'born again' Christian comes from.

Nicodemus takes this literally. He thinks he must climb back into the womb and only then will he be born the right way, free of the sins of his parents and the sins that he commits. He does not catch the symbolic meaning of being born from above or being born anew.

Jesus has to explain it again, this time telling Nicodemus that his body and his spirit are mysteriously born from above. He tells him of the wind and its unpredictable patterns--that we do not know where it comes or where it goes, but we can hear it. The Spirit is like that, making each of us new.

The last words Nicodemus says are, "how can these things be?"

And then, verses 11-17 shift to second person plural - meaning these words are for us, the congregation, and are no longer the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus is talking directly to us this time, and that's when it gets awkward. Jesus turns from Nicodemus to us now, and wants us to wrestle, too.

Jesus is speaking truth about what faith is, although it does seem that Jesus is also being purposefully ambiguous. Faith is not a verb in this story. Faith is an action. Would we have done any better in this conversation than Nicodemus, trying to understand Jesus? I'm not so sure we would. Would we have walked away, more frustrated than relieved after working up the courage to go meet with Jesus to leave that conversation with more questions than answers? Or would we find comfort and clarity in his words?

Jesus turns to us and tells us that the way of faith is in the action of seeing Jesus lifted up like the snake in the wilderness--the snake that Moses put on a staff when the people were intensely ill and needed a cure. This is a metaphor for the coming day when Jesus will be lifted up on a cross and crucified. Jesus turns to us and says that in gazing up his suffering, we will act out our faith. Faith is a verb in the Gospel of John, not a noun. People in John's Gospel do not possess faith, like an object to shine up and put on a shelf to admire occasionally or a precious treasure to lock inside a safe. Faith is an action--it is not crawling back inside our mother's wombs. It is feeling the wind and believing even when we can't see it. It is seeing the suffering of others and

knowing that our salvation lies in suffering with others. Faith is waking Jesus up in the middle of the night with our questions. And not walking away until we have our answers.

The encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus shows us the ‘ambiguity of faith,’ as Dr. Karoline Lewis says in her commentary on John.¹

But Nicodemus appears two more times in the Gospel of John. Once more to defend Jesus from the Pharisees, but still with self-preservation in mind. And the next is with Joseph of Arimathea with burial spices for his body. Karoline Lewis assumes this might be because Nicodemus is trying to save his own skin in front of his peers. And implied in his assistance with the body of Jesus is he is paying his respects, in the dark yet again, or he is testing Jesus in his death. Will faith-the-action really come, like Jesus told him, because Jesus was raised up on the cross and people gazed upon God suffering?

Nicodemus flits in and out of the Gospel of John, always seeks, with one foot in and one foot out. A deep thinker. A wrestler of God. A question asker.

So what questions are you longing to ask Jesus in the middle of the night? What is keeping you up right now? I implore you, do not walk away from those questions. Defend Jesus in front of your peers. Come and witness his suffering, even if you are testing Jesus a little while you do it. Come and ask “How can these things be?”

When Jesus tells you of the mysteries of faith-the-action, sit with him. Jesus will stay up all night with you, reminding you that you don’t need to climb back inside your mother’s womb.

Sit with Jesus in the night.

Then go live like you can see the wind--you’ll meet the spirit there, not back in the womb.

Amen.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=43