

Epiphany 3 NL 2022
John 3: 1-21
January 23, 2022

Nicodemus is an interesting character. He's a prominent religious leader—someone people look to for answers—an expert. But the truth is he doesn't know it all—and, to his credit, he knows it. He doesn't know what to make of Jesus—so he comes, under the cover of darkness, for a closer look.

I'm connecting with Nicodemus today because I find myself wanting to take a closer look. I want to take a closer look at something Nicodemus has a hard time understanding—this idea of being born again.

There are many Christians who rally around the idea of being born again. They connect it with a particular experience—a moment when they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they knew in their heart of hearts that Jesus is their Lord and Savior. It's a life-changing experience.

There is nothing wrong with this—and much that is beautiful about it. The trouble is when having this particular experience becomes a litmus test for being a real Christian. When someone asks, "Are you born again?", it's usually followed up with how you can or need to be.

The translation that we read today is a bit different. Jesus says to Nicodemus, ". . . no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." That's sounds pretty different than being

born again. But the tricky thing is that the Greek word means both “born again” and “born from above.”

I don’t know if the same is true for you but I have tended to skip over this truly remarkable image of being born because I’ve been bludgeoned by the born again question. I’m realizing that I’ve thrown the proverbial baby out with the bath water, and that it’s time to take a second look.

Life in our mother’s womb is not something we remember consciously. It’s a very contained world. We sleep almost 90% of the time but when we open our eyes all we can see are our own arms and legs and the amniotic fluid that surrounds us.

You need to be born anew—born from above to see the kingdom of God.

Birth is an intense process—bright lights, new sounds and smells—but most of all it’s a lot of pressure. It’s being squeezed—especially your head being squeezed. And it’s a sudden, dramatic increase in oxygen levels and a new way of breathing.

Being born is no cake-walk.

Nicodemus has a really hard time understanding what in the world Jesus is talking about. He has his way of understanding the faith based on a lifetime of study and practice. He believes he understands something about who God is—and he recognizes that God is present in Jesus in an unusual way. But when Jesus tells him he needs to be born from above, he’s baffled.

Being born from above is another way of saying being born from God. What's so worth noticing here is that this is a very feminine picture of God. If God is giving birth to us, in this image, God is a mother. All these years of reading and hearing this story—and this is the first time I've seen that.

This is also a super-intimate picture of our relationship with God. And, while birth is a hard process for the baby, it is a painful, usually exhausting process for the mother—especially if the labor is long. This is a picture of a God who suffers so that we can be born again—so that we can have life in a new way.

This pandemic has been an experience of loss for almost everyone. There is definitely a continuum—some of us have experienced much more than others. But there is no disputing that so much has changed. I mostly just keep doing what I need to do every day in my little orbit. I don't think a lot about either the past or the future—I guess that's how I've been coping.

But every now and again, I think about being part of a turning point in history. I think about how—if my kids have kids—they will be learning about this in school and that it will be seen as an inflection point when the whole world changed. It's really hard to see a big change when you're living in the middle of it. But even I can see some of it. So many of the basic things of our lives have changed—school, work, getting food—even church. I don't think

any of us know where we're going to land but one thing is certain, it's going to be a new way of living.

Just a couple of weeks into the pandemic—almost 2 years ago—I remember preaching about birth pangs. This has been a long birthing experience—a long labor. A long labor that may go on for quite a while yet. God, the laboring mother, is working hard to deliver us into this new life—and we are getting our heads squeezed. That is definitely how I feel—like my head is being squeezed—things are shifting—there is a lot of pressure.

It's an experience of being born—and I think we're ready to have it done with. But the thing is we don't get to choose when we're born.

Sam Matagi is known on YouTube as the “No-Handed Bandit”—a name he gave himself. He's made dozens of “how-to” videos teaching amputees around the world how to do things like tying a necktie, driving, grilling, and rock-climbing. Sam also does things I could never imagine doing with hands, like scaling a coconut tree.

He says, “It makes my whole week when I come up with a new way to accomplish a task and then share it with other people who have lost their hands.” He does all this in addition to his day job as a teacher's aide for special-needs students.

In 2010, Sam lost both of his hands while working as a power lineman. In an electrical accident, more than 15,000 volts of electricity surged through his body. Doctors desperately tried to save his hands. When they couldn't, they told him that they needed to amputate his hands in order to save his life. "It was tough to hear that, but I wanted to live," Sam said. "So I told them to take off my hands."

Family members surrounded him with love and support, including his brother Fatu—who could offer a different kind of support because two years before, he had lost his right hand and arm while working as a power lineman. Fatu knew that his brother had a tough road ahead as he learned new ways to do all those every day living tasks. He told Sam, "Get comfortable with failure," Fatu told his brother. "Everything will be hard, but don't give up. Eventually, you'll forget how convenient it was to have two arms and hands."

As he worked to learn this new way of life, Sam did what we all do when we're trying to figure out how to do something new—he looked on YouTube for a how-to video. There was only one. That was how his "No-Handed Bandit" series was born.

In Sam's words, "Becoming an amputee is like *being born again* — *you have to relearn how to do everything*," he said. "Buttoning was difficult. Tying a necktie. Folding down the collars on a dress shirt. I decided to figure it out and then share what I'd

learned. I remember that feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. Helping somebody else is good for my soul. It's what keeps me going."

This incredibly inspiring story is more than that. It's also a picture of what it looks like to be born again *and* born from above. We are so like Nicodemus with his questions. "How can these things be?", we ask. Just because we can't imagine a new world—that is more loving and more just—being born in the midst of this awful pandemic—doesn't mean it isn't happening.

Jesus points Nicodemus and us to the cross—that place where everything seemed lost—as the turning point. In this moment, Nicodemus doesn't understand it but when Jesus talks about being lifted up, he's talking about the cross.

“. . . 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."

One of the things I love most about the Gospel of John is that, for John, eternal life is not just about what happens when you die. Eternal life is about being in relationship with God. It is possible right now—and it continues after we die. I hear Jesus saying, "If

you trust me—if you trust God’s love for you—if you trust my way of living, you will experience the unmatched life that comes from God right now.

Jesus’s way of living is having God at the absolute center of our lives and being able to see the needs of others as being as important as our own. That’s what it means to love God with our whole selves and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Sam Matagi figured that out in a whole new way when he was born again by losing his hands. He had to learn new ways of doing almost everything—surely there was joy in discovering and accomplishing that. But the meaning—the hope—what keeps him going—is sharing that with others.

The cross is not just about the loss of Jesus’s life. It’s about God giving life to the world in and through Jesus. This moment we are in is undeniably one of great loss. But that is not all that it is. God is loving the world into new life. God is loving us into new life. We are learning new ways of doing every day life. We don’t know what this new world will look like when it’s finally born but we know how to live—with God and the needs of our fellow human beings at the center—trusting, that eternal life—belonging to God, knowing God’s presence and care—is ours right now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.