

Sermon - Trinity Sunday, Year B
John 3:1-17
5/26/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Back before I went to seminary, I was working as a sort of low grade executive at one of the big studios in Los Angeles. One Monday morning, I ran into a colleague of mine in the kitchen on our office building floor. He asked what I had done over the weekend, and I said something like, “well, on Saturday I met up with a friend for dinner” and “on Sunday, I went to church and then over to the farmer’s market.” He set down his mug of coffee and I watched his eyes widen with zeal. He lowered his voice. “Are you....you know....a *Christian*?” “Yeah,” I said. “I am.” He leaned in a little closer. I distinctly remember him lifting his eyes to scan the expanse of the kitchen to see if anybody else was there. “Do you...do you want to join our studio bible study?” Now this *was* surprising. “Sure.” I said. My colleague was thrilled. “Okay! Awesome!” He said, “I’ll send you a calendar invite!”

Not ten minutes later, I was back at my desk, and I saw that – sure enough – a google calendar invitation from this colleague had popped up in my inbox: Wednesdays. One o’clock PM. Jack Cohen Building. Conference Room 309. “Production Review.” The calendar entry for the film studio Bible study was officially called, “Production Review.” Anyone who had access to your schedule - your assistant, your boss, your agent, whomever - anyone looking at your calendar would see that Wednesdays at 1:00 PM were blocked out for...a “production review.”

Of course that very next Wednesday I made sure to bring my bible with me to work that morning. At ten minutes to one, I closed my computer and found my way to the correct building - conference room 309. Outside the room, a little screen displayed the names of the reservations. At 1:00 PM, there it was: “Production review.” I went inside.

As the minutes passed, the conference room filled. There were assistants, producers, casting agents, craft services coordinators, editors, and - I was shocked - one of the highest level, most famous executives at the studio. He took the seat across the table from me. I wanted to be swallowed by the earth when he asked me - laughing - “does your boss know you’re here?” “Yes,” I choked. “Well done!” He replied. “Mine doesn’t.”

This bible study was – to this day – one of the strangest experiences of my life. It was *good*. We read scripture together. We asked phenomenal questions. We told stories. We made friends. **And everybody lied about it.** We lied about it so hard that we couldn’t even name the conference room for what it was. We lied so thoroughly that our calendars claimed that on any given Wednesday at 1:00 PM, thirty-five to forty studio employees were at some mysterious, unspecified “production review”! Several members of the bible study joked about how they met openly, frequently for AA meetings on the lot -the meetings were advertised far and wide, as they should be - but here they were: thrust into cloak-and-dagger subterfuge when it came to being religious.

Considering the events of today’s Gospel, I wonder...if Nicodemus had lived in the 21st century...and if Nicodemus had had an up-to-date google calendar...I wonder whether a portion of it – late into the night – might have been blocked out with some mysterious event labeled “production review.” I wonder if he would have quietly excused himself from the executive dinner with his fellow members of the Sanhedrin. “Sorry fellas. It’s been a great evening. But I have a production review.” And then he goes – quietly, secretly – to find Jesus.

Nicodemus could perhaps be considered a well-renowned studio executive of his day. He was a prominent member of the Jewish community – a counselor, a teacher, a man of authority. He was a member of the very council that would sentence Jesus to his death. People knew who he was and what he was about, and it would have been profoundly troublesome if anyone knew

he was wondering about Jesus. And so he comes to this compelling teacher in the obscurity of the night. He offers Jesus a generous compliment, and Jesus does not mince words: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” In some translations, the phrase is rendered: “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” The word here in Greek can be translated both ways. It is a puzzle - delightful and infuriating for translators - but the truth of the text is that it can be interpreted both ways. “You must be born from above” or – “you must be born again.”

Either way, this is unsettling. Nicodemus is not a fool. When he asks Jesus “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” he knows this is not the answer. He offers the most absurd understanding of Jesus’s statement with the intention of forcing this teacher into a genuine revelation. If one cannot literally enter the womb again, what – for mercy’s sake – could you possibly mean?

To be born into this world of flesh is to know trauma. When we were born, all of us – though we generally cannot remember it - were forced with little agency from a place of safety to a place marked at first by confusion. But after the blood and the fear and the pain that our little baby consciousness registered on some level of terror, we breathed air for the first time. We saw light. We were alive. We were a bundle of possibility, and nothing would ever be the same again.

When Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about the need to be born from above – to be born again – this description is deliberate. Approaching the kingdom of God requires nothing less than being re-born of water and of Spirit. You will be moved - with little understanding - from a place of safety to a place marked at first by confusion. There may be blood. There may be fear. There may be pain. But you will breathe air for the first time. You will see Light. You will *live*.

You will become a bundle of possibility, and nothing will ever be the same again.

Jesus does not withhold the stakes from us. To be reborn of water and spirit is not merely to live, but to know life that is eternal: “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.” And this eternal life begins now. Isn’t it interesting how awful human beings are at thinking about time? We imagine “eternal life” to be something that waits for us in the future - and certainly it does - but it is also the present and immediate reality of our lives when we have been found by Jesus Christ.

We only need remember our brother, Nicodemus. He appears three times in the bible. The first is the scene in which we find him today, approaching Jesus by night, in secret, in the first-century iteration of a fake “production review.” The second time we meet him is just a few chapters further in the Gospel from St. John - chapter seven - when the chief priests and authorities are trying to arrest Jesus, and Nicodemus speaks up: “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” A general statement, perhaps, but a bold one. The third time we find Nicodemus, Jesus has been crucified and has died. Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for Jesus’ body, and Nicodemus goes with him. Not only does Nicodemus publicly accompany Joseph to bring Jesus’ body to the tomb for burial, he brings 100 pounds of aloe and myrrh. He has gone from secretly approaching Jesus in darkness to embracing his body and blessing it with enough precious spices to bury an entire royal household.

This is what it is to be born again, from above. To have our lives so completely transformed that we move from furtive questions in the dark to a full-hearted embrace of the One who is Light himself. We stretch out these new bones. We are given new hearts of flesh. There will be adventures along the way - some generic, some bold - but once we have been found by him, we have taken our first breaths within a life that cannot end.