**March 8, 2020**

**John 3:1-17**

One early spring day last year, folks got together on a Saturday morning to clean up our grounds. People raked and trimmed and hauled brush and blew leaves and tidied our property to a more presentable state. (We need to do so again.) It was too early in the year for much wildlife to be present, but we found the promise of life-to-come in dozens of praying mantis egg sacks which had been carefully laid. The mothers had long since moved on (and likely died), leaving behind their children as legacies. Adam and I took one home to watch and see what happened. Every day we checked for activity. Then one day in early summer (much later than I expected!) we found the case bursting with hundreds of baby mantis. They quickly moved over one another and the branch and the bush and the house. Within days, these tiny creatures – smaller than your fingernail – had scattered from the backyard to the front, crawling up the mailbox and around the door. They were eager to explore and eat and make their presence known. One of the largest (longest) insects on earth. [[1]](#footnote-1)

The mantis birthing process is predictably different from a cow’s. When I lived in middle Tennessee, just north of Nashville, I regularly went to a church member’s farm to ride horses. After we rode down his fence line and through the pastures, we came down the hill one day to find a mother cow in the final throes of labor. She had curled up on the ground, panting and pushing out the calf within. We watched as her baby slid out in a pile of goop, completely disoriented to the world waiting. The mama licked and cleaned up her calf who eventually wobbled into standing and tottered around to explore her new home. The baby didn’t go far afield, though. It knew that it needed its mama (who was exhausted from her labor, but still ready to protect and respond to whatever needs her calf had).

Neither the praying mantis nor the calf had any hope of returning to their mother’s womb after they were born. They wouldn’t fit, for one. Once unfolded and activated, there was no going back… any more than a human child could return to its maternal womb after birth.

Certainly people around Jesus would have been more familiar with natural birthing than we are today, so Nicodemus was predictably confused when Jesus told him that no one can be part of God’s kingdom without being born again (or born from above). But, as David LaMotte reminded us last week of the human tendency to put ourselves in the role of every protagonist, perhaps Jesus’ point to Nicodemus wasn’t about the creature *born* but more about the Creator birthing. Maybe Jesus wasn’t telling Nicodemus so much about what *he* (Nicodemus) had to do to meet God; maybe Jesus was telling Nicodemus about what God had to do to meet Nicodemus.

Babies *think* that the world revolves around them; they are only aware of their own needs and experiences. But the mother, the Creator, knows better. The Creator knows the work it took to bring that creature into being. The Creator knows the threats that surround their young, vulnerable life. Even before the Mother bled and sweat and pushed the creature into life, the Mother grew and changed and planned for what would happen when this day came. The Creator was *incredibly* active bringing its child to life. In contrast, the birthing process is largely passive for the one being born. The creature is pushed into the world – certainly without any planning of its own. The creature receives the life given to it.

So it is that our Almighty and Creator God birthed our life in its beginning, and birthed our salvation. And *we* received these gifts. We didn’t go to any trouble in being here. We can’t do anything to save ourselves, but God (with Christ) prepared a way for us to enter the Kingdom. Through the Holy Spirit, God called us to life – eternal life at that – so that the world might be saved through Jesus Christ. “God so loved that world that he gave his only Son… not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Creator God planned for what the creatures needed. God sweat and pushed and bled so that we might have life.

But we, God’s children, think that the world revolves around us. We know only our own needs and experiences. We weren’t here when God labored over us. We weren’t around when God was nesting and getting ready for what would come to be. We frantically run around scratching and sniffing and trying to understand the world and figure out what’s safe, as if we are on our own in life – while all the while God is right here, ready to feed and protect and whatever else it takes to safeguard God’s children.

One of my favorite passages by Henri Nouwen addressed this very turn in our understanding. Please indulge me for repeating this quote I’ve referenced before: “The question is not ‘How am I to find God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be found by God.’ The question is not ‘How am I to know God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be known by God?’ And finally, the question is not ‘how am I to love God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be loved by God?’” [[2]](#footnote-2)

God gave us our very lives. God knows us, though we may *not* know God. God knew us so well that God knew we would need help staying in his kingdom. So “God gave his only Son… *not* to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was a faith professional: a leader of the Jews, immersed in the daily study and practice of scripture. Certainly, he knew God. He at least knew the official answers about where to find God and how to love God. And yet… it wasn’t enough. Nicodemus had a deeper longing within himself. A longing for something more than he had, something more than he knew. This longing propelled him into Christ’s room in the middle of the night. Under the cover of darkness, he came to talk to Jesus. He hoped for a sign, a bit of wisdom, a bit of hope. He wanted to learn and grow and be changed from what he had known and been. He wasn’t explicitly looking to be reborn, but he was longing for life – more than he even knew. He longed for God to refresh his soul, to reform his life, to rebirth his spirit. “Teacher,” he professed, “you are from God.” And then he sat down to listen to what God had to say. He opened himself to whatever Christ might share. He readied himself to be pushed out – rebirthed – into a new understanding.

Our theological tradition values God’s re-formation of God’s people. While we may *know* one thing one day, we believe that God may push us in a new direction the next day, re-forming us, re-birthing us into new ways of being and doing and understanding. In order to maintain faithfulness and adherence to God’s will, we do not accept the *status quo* on any given day, but constantly ask God and one another, “is this who God is? is this what God intends?” *Ecclesia semper reformanda est*. “The church is always being reformed.” We do not do the re-forming ourselves. We never claim to bring or re-shape our life (for that would admit heresy and a trust in some power other than God), but continually look to God’s guidance each and every day, in each and every thought, word, and deed. So we read scripture, to remind ourselves of God’s unique and historical presence in the world. We confess the ways that we fall short of God’s design on our lives. We ask God to clarify our vision that we might see where God is at work in the world, and that we might join God in that work. We even pray before committee meetings, asking God to guide the conversation and decisions. Individually and at Sweet Hollow we are always seeking God’s re-formation of our hearts and minds and strengths. In this, we actively seek to be re-born and re-formed.

I pray that this Lenten season that you will take the journey God directs and find yourself refreshed, renewed, and re-born on Easter morning when you see Christ’s empty tomb. Join Nicodemus (and the women) who followed God’s nudge into the dark to ask questions and search for the God who formed them and loved them, who bled and sweat and pushed them into salvation. Amen.

1. <https://ourplnt.com/top-10-largest-insects-earth/#axzz6Fq9r3PMr> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nouwen, Henri. The Return of the Prodigal Son. Image Books; Doubleday: New York, .1992. pg 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)