

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

Bringing new life into the world is not only miraculous, it's messy. It doesn't matter whether it's an animal birth or a human birth, it's a miracle that's just plain messy. And anyone who has ever been in the vicinity of new life coming into the world can attest to that fact. More than one new father has had war stories to tell about what he saw and heard while attending the birth of his child. It's one of those experiences that is engraved on the brain forever. And we shouldn't forget the Mom who will have war stories of her own about the experience. Bringing new life into the world is just plain messy and emotionally laden in a way that very few people anticipate.

In this morning's gospel lesson, we meet up with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, who has sought out Jesus under cover of darkness. No explanation is given about why Nicodemus wants to meet with Jesus. But he approaches Jesus from out of the darkness.....just as we often do.....out of the darkness of unbelief and uncertainty and misunderstanding. Nicodemus begins by confirming.....almost confessing.....Jesus' divinity. He says that he knows these signs that Jesus has done cannot be done apart from the presence of God. Nicodemus is sure about one thing.....that Jesus is a Godly man. He's just not sure what else Jesus might be. And he addresses Jesus as 'Rabbi' which is something that only Jesus' disciples do. Is Nicodemus tipping his hand? Is he intimating that he has become a disciple or at the very least he is flirting with the idea of becoming a disciple?

After his confession, Nicodemus never gets a chance to ask a question or state why he has come looking for Jesus. Jesus pre-empts him with one of the most famous statements in the New Testament: "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Jesus answers a question that Nicodemus never asked.

At this point, it might be helpful in understanding the depth of this passage to realize that the Greek word *anōthen* has three possible translations. It can mean "again" or it can mean "from above" or it can mean "anew." All three of these translations can be used in this passage and each gives a slightly different meaning to what we hear.

Initially, Nicodemus chooses the first translation: “again”. Born again. He takes Jesus literally and begins to protest that it’s an impossibility for an adult can go back in time and be born again! And, of course, he’s right about that. Jesus is quick to clarify by telling Nicodemus that he’s not talking about being born from the flesh.....flesh is flesh and Spirit is Spirit. Jesus makes it clear that he is talking about the Spirit being born “from above.” This time the translation is a little different. Jesus confirms the reality of the Spirit by equating it with the wind.....that we cannot see.....and we don’t know where it came from.....and we don’t know where it’s going.....but it is nevertheless real even though invisible to human eyes. Just like with the Spirit, we can see the effects of the wind but we can’t see the wind itself. Jesus points out to Nicodemus that if he can’t believe the things that Jesus tells him and shows him in this world of the flesh, how will he be able to understand and believe in the heavenly things that Jesus is sharing with him? If he doesn’t understand the things he sees how will he ever understand the things he cannot see?

Being born is a messy business. It’s a messy business when we are born in the flesh and it’s a messy business when we are born in the Spirit. Faith is a messy business. Faith is about putting what’s most important to us on the line for something that we cannot see and we cannot prove, but we know in our hearts is a certainty. Getting to that place of faith, being born into the life of the Spirit that Jesus proclaims to us is a messy business. It is full of fits and starts. It is full of false labor. It is sometimes painful. And sometimes we’d like to reverse course and not bring this life into the world at all. And yet, at the heart of it.....in the midst of our own hearts.....we know that the new life of the flesh that we are bringing into the world is filled with joy and wonder beyond our wildest dreams or expectations. And this is what Jesus promises us in the new birth of the Spirit in the kingdom of God.....joy and wonder beyond our wildest expectations.

In contemplating this story about Nicodemus, I was struck by the fact that we don’t know what motivated him. We don’t know why he came. But he did. And twice more in the story presented in John’s gospel, Nicodemus asserts himself on Jesus’ behalf. When Jesus is arrested, Nicodemus comes to his defense with the Sanhedrin, but to no avail. And after the crucifixion, it is Nicodemus who joins Joseph of Arimathea to provide Jesus with a burial site and ritual fit for a king. Something is pulling at Nicodemus. Something powerful continues to draw Nicodemus toward Jesus.....in much the same way that we are drawn to Jesus.

In my research on this whole birthing process metaphor, I came across a reflection by Deborah Kapp in [Feasting on the Word](#) in which she says:

“God works hard for us and our faith. God conceives us as Christians and nurtures us in the wombs of our faith, safe and warm

and secret. At some point, like any pregnant woman who is close to full term, God gets impatient with gestation and wants to get on with it; God wants to push that baby through the birth canal into greater maturity, into fullness of life, into a faith lived wholly in the world. That is what Jesus talks about in this text. Jesus thinks it is time Nicodemus came through that spiritual birth canal. Perhaps he thinks it is time for many others to be reborn, too. God is ready to give us birth by water and spirit.”

This birth analogy and Nicodemus’ appearance to Jesus so intrigued me that I did a little research to find out how labor in the flesh gets triggered in the first place. As it turns out, there is some credible research from the University of Dallas that indicates that the developing infant may actually be the one who starts the whole process in motion. As soon as the lungs are ready, the baby sends a hormonal signal to the mother and the mother’s body responds with labor. It’s a mutual process, but starts with the baby itself. It’s only one theory under investigation, but it is a novel one and very intriguing.

So are we ready? Is it time for us to send the signal to a waiting and loving God that we are anticipating with great joy and no small amount of anxiety our entrance into a larger life in this life by presenting ourselves as being open and willing to be transformed and re-born through the power of the Spirit?

“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.”

Faith is miraculous and it’s a messy business, but the God that loves us beyond all comprehension is waiting patiently for us to give the signal that we are ready. Sometimes this birthing process happens quickly. For others it takes a long time and happens over many years. Either way, being born of the Spirit is a miracle for each of us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

<http://www.pregnancyandbaby.com/pregnancy/articles/941885/what-starts-labor>

Kapp, Deborah, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, p. 72.