**A Skip in the Heart**

A Meditation on John 3: 1 – 21

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church May 30, 2021

God went to the doctor

And the doctor said,

“You don’t need me,

You’re God.”

“Well, you’re pretty good

at playing me,

I figured you’d

know what the

problem was.”

So the doctor

examined Him.

She couldn’t find

anything wrong

except a little

skip in God’s heart.

“Probably nothing,”

she told God.

“But eat more fish.”

God sighed.

He was hoping

For more than that.

Maybe an antibiotic,

Or a shot.

He knew about that

skip in His heart.

He knew it was nothing

fish would cure.

The skip had started way back,

when He first heard

that some people

Didn’t believe in Him.

It scared Him.

Still does.

Cynthia Rylant, *God got a dog,* Beach Lane Books,NY, 2003.

This style of imaging God in human terms, in truth, any anthropomorphization of God can both comfort and disturb. Picturing God in a doctor’s office, wearing only a hospital gown, is a far cry from the image of God we witness in Isaiah 6. *That* God wouldn’t fit in a tiny exam room, much less a hospital gown. *That* God is so terrifying that even the seraphim shield themselves with their wings. Maybe we prefer that God, the one who offers burning coals for purification and renewal. That God that seems to both punish and heal in one mysterious movement. I wonder if the God of Rylant’s poem hits a little too close to home. We can imagine an enormous, all-powerful God. We want that God. The one who can be our champion, the mighty God whose voice thunders over the waters. A God who causes even the angelic beings to tremble. A God who needs a doctor? A God with a heart defect? That doesn’t sound like the one we need in our corner. The one who will save the day?

In *Just Jesus: My Struggle to Become Human*, theologian and activist Walter Wink writes:

*God is HUMAN … It is the great error of humanity to believe that it is human. We are only fragmentarily human, fleetingly human, brokenly human. We see glimpses of our humanness, we can only dream of what a more human existence and political order would be like, but we have not yet arrived at true humanness. Only God is human, and we are made in God’s image and likeness — which is to say, we are capable of becoming human.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Nicodemus comes to Jesus, God clothed as humanity, with questions and longings about what it means to be human. Nicodemus comes, wondering if what he has known about the life of faith is true. A Pharisee, Nicodemus had devoted his life to the study of Torah. Unlike the Sadducees, who were a more elite group, the Pharisees were middle class individuals who believed that faith practices (rituals, etc.) did not belong in the hands of a few select, but in everyone’s hands, a priesthood of all believers. Through their study of the scriptures, they sought to bring the holy into the day-to-day dimensions of life. Pharisees honored sacred rituals, they respected established practices of their faith. Remember that.

Because, too often, we shame Nicodemus. We shame him for showing up at night, as if he has come sneaking through the shadows, fearful of being caught. We shame him because we hear John speak about light and darkness, and about living in the light, but there is no need to then make the leap that his appearance after sunset means he is embarrassed to be seen with Jesus.

Nicodemus – maybe he just needed to get the kids to bed first - comes at night, and we contrast that to the next story in John’s gospel, the story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at a well in the middle of the day. We compare their stories and lift her up. While it is true that she has an amazing response to Jesus’ teaching, preaching the good news to her entire village, that doesn’t make Nicodemus’ response any less holy. Maybe she was just an extrovert! A first witness! We can celebrate that and still not throw Nicodemus under the bus. But we will get to Nicodmus’ response in a moment. Let’s take a look at what happens between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus and – who knows – maybe he did risk being shamed by other pharisees. Or maybe, just maybe, they sent Nicodemus on their behalf. Notice all the “we” language he uses. Maybe they looked at each other, and no one would volunteer to visit the rabbi Jesus, so they played “rock, paper, scissors” or they drew straws, and Nicodemus drew the short straw. (One of those times when the short straw is the best straw!)

Nicodemus goes to Jesus, recognizes him with the title, “rabbi” and honors him with a compliment, “we know you come from God.” Then, Nicodemus fumbles in his pocket (Did they have pockets back then?? I hope so…pockets are the best.) for the bit of parchment with his notes…all the questions that the pharisees wanted him to ask, but before he can begin, Jesus speaks. “I assure you, unless someone is born anew it’s not possible to see God’s kingdom.” (John 3: 3 CEB) “Born anew” or “Born from above” are valid translations of what we have typically heard as “born again.” Rev. Meda Stamper, offers this wording: “Unless a person is *born into the worldview of God,* that person cannot see the kingdom.” [[2]](#endnote-2)

“Born into the worldview of God.” Isn’t that what Nicodemus has been trying to do all his life? Live within God’s worldview? But Jesus doesn’t see it quite that way. And I have to disagree with those who say Nicodemus is being dense or slow to catch on to Jesus’ birth metaphor. Nicodemus would have probably have delighted in these mental gymnastics. And Jesus would have been delighted, too. His heart would have skipped a beat in the good way: here is someone who wants to learn, who hungers to know, whose mind is curious and open. And so Jesus continues the dialogue, just as Jesus does (in the next chapter) with the woman at the well. He is no less engaging, no less challenging with her than he is with Nicodemus. Jesus believes in their ability to engage the theological conversation, the kind of conversation that invites birthing.

Which is another aspect of Nicodemus arriving after dark that I find intriguing. The womb is a dark place where life unfolds in miraculous and mysterious ways. So why not, instead of saying that Nicodemus comes at night because he is embarrassed, imagine that Nicodemus, swimming in the darkness of a spiritual womb, is invited to be born anew. The Spirit, holy midwife, is there to bring him into this new worldview, God’s worldview. It might be a slow birth, but it will happen.

I’m going to have to backtrack for a moment, since I glided past something significant that Nicodemus said to Jesus when he arrived. He said, “no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.” (John 3: 3 CEB) Miraculous signs. This made me curious, because we are only in the *third* chapter of John’s gospel. Jesus hasn’t done much yet! What has he done?

He transformed water into wine. At a wedding dinner. A symbol of life and faith. And something we have come to associate with the heavenly banquet. Wine in abundance. The finest of wines. What a curious sign!

The only other sign – and I don’t mean this in the way John speaks of signs, his word for miracles – but the only other *specific* sign that is named - prior to this meeting - is Jesus getting so angry that he makes a whip and chases out the money exchangers in the Temple.

When the religious leaders question his reasons for doing this, and ask for a sign of his authority, he says there *will* be a sign. He speaks of the temple being destroyed and restored in three days, the temple of his body, the dwelling place of God. The religious leaders don’t know what to make of this – only post-Easter can we understand its meaning. John alludes to other signs that brought people to belief, but we do not know what they are…healings, most likely.

Let’s suppose that Nicodemus knew about the transformation of the water to wine (that story probably made it around the neighborhood), and the powerful demonstration with the whip and the money exchangers. Wouldn’t those two be enough to make you wonder? Neither are what you would necessarily expect of God; both open Jesus to speculation, to criticism. They throw you off a bit. Party Jesus and Angry Jesus? “Sommelier Jesus” and “Whipmaker Jesus” just aren’t at the top of our list.

Maybe Jesus…or John’s interpretation of Jesus…is *intended* to throw us off a bit. Maybe that’s what we need to experience rebirth. An infant has an entire world to discover. Everything is new – a rock, a blade of grass, the sun. Perhaps Jesus wanted Nicodemus to experience the world in a new way. To try to experience as God experiences it. For Nicodemus that would require some deconstructing of long held teachings. Not to throw everything away, but to reexamine, to search, to ask, to welcome a God who throws parties and a God who disrupts “business as usual.” And a God who would be lifted up in death.

Jesus prepared Nicodemus for what he would witness. He prepared him that one day, not too far off, Jesus would become the victim of the state, executed over nothing at all. Nicodemus would have to look at Jesus on the cross, would have to see what the world is capable of doing, and then choose how to live with that reality. To allow the Spirit to move him in response.

Nicodemus did not go running out into the streets, knocking on doors, waking the neighbors to tell them about his conversation with Jesus. At least, not that we know of. Probably just as well…they might have wondered if he’d had a little too much wine. But here are two things we know. Nicodemus would be the one to argue that Jesus deserved a fair hearing before he could be sentenced (John 7). And Nicodemus would come with 75 pounds of spices for Jesus’ body. (John 19: 38 – 42) He would be faithful in the ways that he had been taught – in legal practice and holy ritual. So had he been born anew? I would venture to say that he had. For he had looked at the Christ, nailed to a tree, and then tended that broken body with a compassion that is born not from religious obligation and duty, but from faith.

And as God watched Nicodemus do this precious work - the tending of Jesus’ body – as God watched, head in hands, heart pounding erratically, how God must have given thanks for those such as Nicodemus, who extend such tenderness to one another.

There are many ways to live out the Spirit’s calling. There are those who are called to run out into the village and preach to everyone, and then there are those who are called to quietly go about, doing acts of compassion and justice as Nicodemus did. How will the Spirit move in you?

Thanks be to God for the diversity of ways that the Spirit is alive in each of you. Amen.

Sources consulted:

* Working Preacher
* Connections Lectionary Commentary
* Feasting on The Word

1. Andrew Prior, [One Man's Web - Wanderment (onemansweb.org)](https://onemansweb.org/wanderment-john-31-21.html), citing Walter Wink (Just Jesus: My Struggle to Become Human, Image Books, 2014, p. 102) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Meda Stamper, WorkingPreacher.org, June 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)