***“Born of the Wind”***

**Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17**

**Lent 2/March 5, 2022**

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*Let us pray—*

*O Lord of light and salvation, let these words of Scripture live not only in our mouths, but in our hearts, that we will embody your truth and confess with our lives that Jesus is Lord. Amen.*

This week I have been thinking about the lowbrow 2006 comedy *Talladega Nights* (a favorite of my son who was 13 when it came out—it has *pitch-perfect* middle school gross-out humor).

In the movie, racing legend Ricky Bobby gathers his family—plus his father-in-law and best friend, Carl—around the table and says grace for the food. *“Dear Lord Baby Jesus,”* he begins, *“or as our brothers to the south call you, Hey-Zeus, we thank you so much for this bountiful harvest of Domino’s, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell.”*

He continues praying to *“Dear Lord Baby Jesus”* and *“Dear Tiny Infant Jesus,”* thanking him for *“my family, my beautiful two sons, Walker and Texas Ranger, … and of course my red-hot smokin’ wife.”*

Ricky Bobby continues to pray, asking the Lordto use his *“baby Jesus powers”* to heal his father-in-law. Finally his wife interrupts: *“You know, Sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don’t always have to call him Baby. It’s a bit odd and off puttin’’ to pray to a baby.”*

Ricky Bobby replies, *“Well, look, I like the Christmas Jesus best. When you say grace, you can say it to grown-up Jesus or teenage Jesus or bearded Jesus or whoever you want.”* At this point, Carl pipes in with his preferences: *“I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo T-shirt, ‘cause it says like, ‘I want to be formal, but I’m here to party too.’ ‘Cause I like to party, so I like my Jesus to party.”*

Then one of the boys says he likes to think of Jesus as *“a ninja fighting off evil samurai,”* and Carl adds, *“I like to picture Jesus with angel wings. And he’s singing lead vocals for Lynyrd Skynyrd, and I’m in the front row hammered drunk.”*

Ricky Bobby returns to his prayer: *“Dear eight-pound, six-ounce newborn infant Jesus, you don’t even know a word yet, just a little infant and so cuddly—but still omnipotent. We just thank you for all the races I’ve won and the $21.2 million—Woo! Love that money! —that I’ve accrued over this past season.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

However ridiculous—or tasteless—the scene may be, it mirrors as only satire can a sad reality of church history and of today’s religious landscape. We are all tempted to remake Jesus into just about anything we like. We like a Jesus who … likes whatever we like … In contrast, too many of us, whether as individuals or groups, honestly—and naively—believe our view is *“objective”* and *“true,”* with no distortion at all.

And this applies to how we interpret scripture, as well. Some texts are so familiar and so loaded with associations that the thought of preaching them *one more time* is almost exhausting.

It reminds me of a violinist who gets a little depressed every November, as she contemplates another season of *The Nutcracker* performances. It is not that she does not love and appreciate the music. It is just that every year she plays the same part in the same way for six weeks straight, and there is only so much innovation one can bring to the third violin section. *“I know it’s an orchestra classic that comes with the territory, and I’m glad for the work,”* she says, *“but I really wish people knew there was more to the repertoire than ‘The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy.’”*

John 3:1-17 is the preacher’s equivalent of *The Nutcracker:* a pulpit classic that comes with the territory. Sooner or later we have to deal with its familiar prose, its theological elegance, its pride of place in our historical confessions.

We also have a muddle of associations to manage, and that complicates things. For example, the language of being *“born again,”* and verse 16 in particular (instantly recognizable in its abbreviated for: “John 3:16”), is a staple of highway road signs and bumper stickers and football games. It is shorthand for a certain kind of religious fervor, as people everywhere, Christians and non-Christians alike, can tell you.

This means that before someone like me has any room to do his or her job, the stalls have to mucked out, the stereotypes and bad press that this passage evokes has to be named so that there is space for us to hear the images afresh. John 3:1-17 may seem like the exclusive property of one brand of Christianity. In fact, since the First Great Awakening in the 1740s, it has been a key passage for evangelical Christians, usually quoted in revivals to convince *“unbelievers”* to be *“born again.”*

But (I’d like to suggest) that there is wisdom *for each of us* and *all of us* in this text*.*

**Today, of course, is the second Sunday of Lent, the season that leads to Easter.**And Easter is about new birth.

In today’s lectionary text from the Gospel of John, Jesus explains the *mystery* of being born into *“the kingdom of God.”* And the story prompts us to reflect about *renewal and rebirth* — and how we are spiritually *transformed.* And on our Lenten journey to the cross, we need it.[[2]](#footnote-2)

So let’s set aside our baggage and try to take a fresh look at this beautiful and powerful text.

***The Big Picture (the backdrop)***

*First,* we need to understand that the central imperative in the teaching of Jesus *is to live accord with God’s character;* this is the *backdrop* to this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus. *“Be compassionate, as God is compassionate.”* As an ethic, an *imitatio dei,* its associations are rich.

For instance, we are to *feel* for others as a mother feels for the children of her womb and act in accord with those feelings. We are to feel for others as God feels for all God’s children and act accordingly.

Though the most common early Christian word for God’s character is *love,* rather than *compassion,* the meaning is the same. The first letter of John, for example, is a sustained meditation on God’s love and the life of faithfulness to God as the imitation of God’s love. *“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God”* (4:16). *“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God”* (4:7). *“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another”* (4:11).

So also, Paul names the primary Christian virtue as *love.* In his magnificent exposition of *“the gifts of the Spirit,”* the fruit of a life centered in God, the climax is one of the most familiar verses in the New Testament: *“Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love”* (1 Cor. 13:13). It is grounded in God’s character as love, as disclosed in the life and death of Jesus: *“God proves [God’s] love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us”* (Rom. 5:8).

Which brings us to John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world.”* For John, Jesus is the revelation of God’s love, and so the *imitation dei* becomes an *imitation Christi,* an imitation of Jesus. The Jesus of John’s gospel says, *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another”* (13:34). The symmetry between the message of Jesus and the testimony of the early church is striking: love one another because the character of God as known in Jesus is love.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*This is the big picture.*

***Metaphor***

Second, notice the *structure* of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus—a pattern used throughout John’s Gospel:

Jesus makes a statement: *“No one can see the kingdom of God- without being born anew”* (or *“born again,”* or *“born from above”*—all are possible translations).

Nicodemus takes the words literally and misunderstands: *“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb to be born?*

Jesus corrects the misunderstanding: *“You must be born of the Spirit” (*or *“wind”).*

You see, the *structure* of the narrative *shifts* the meaning from *literal* to *metaphorical*. What might we learn from that?

Of course, this story, like most of John’s Gospel, goes beyond anything Jesus himself said or did. It is John’s post-Easter testimony to Jesus (50 years later), reflecting the experience of his community. *They* had been brought from *death* to *life* through Jesus, just as *they* had been brought from *darkness* into *light.* Their use of this imagery not only is consistent with the message of Jesus, but confirms that these were *central metaphors* for those who stood closest to Jesus in time.[[4]](#footnote-4)

***God’s Passion—the World***

Third, (we’ve got a three-point sermon going on here!) notice that God’s love is directed at something *very specific: the* ***world.***To love God, to center in God (to belove God) means to love what God loves. *What does God love? “God so loved the world”* (John 3:16), not Christians in particular, or the elect, or the church, but *the world.*

God’s passion is the world. Christians have often been fearful of loving the world, for they have sometimes confused it with *“worldliness.”* But loving the world doesn’t mean getting lost in the world. It means loving the world—the creation—as God loves the world.

How much does God love the world? So much *“that he gave his only Son.”* In John, this phrase does not refer to Jesus’ death on the cross as a substitutionary atonement for sin, but for the *incarnation* as a whole.

In other words, God loves the world so much that God incarnate in Jesus became part of it, vulnerable to it, partaking of it. To love the world means to love the world as God in Jesus loved the world, to give one’s life for it.

***Believing is Beloving***

But what about *“believing?”* The text says, *“everyone who believes in him [Jesus].”*

Here, as most often in the New Testament, *believing* does *not* mean believing in doctrines about Jesus, but *“beloving,”* the beloving that is a combination of *commitment, loyalty, faithfulness, allegiance* to the beloved, and *trust* in the beloved.

The result? That *“they may not perish but may have eternal life.” “Eternal life”* in John’s Gospel does not mean an afterlife (you’ll have to go elsewhere in the Bible for that), but *“the life of the age to come.”*

Already in the present, we may experience the life of the age to come by *centering in God* (as known in Jesus). Jesus is now, already, *“the resurrection and the life,”* to use another of John’s phrases, the way from death to life.[[5]](#footnote-5)

And so, I suspect I may have shared a number of things about John 3 this morning that you haven’t heard before. *Which is a good thing.* It is a sophisticated theological story for grown-ups. Not a bumper-sticker for the likes of Ricky Bobby. Reclaim it.

***The Unending Conversation***

You know, we are all part of an *unending conversation* (not unlike the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus). Twentieth century American scholar, Kenneth Burke, provides a powerful insight to the image of human life, a parable of our lives:

*Being born* is like entering a parlor where there’s already a conversation going on. The conversation began long before we were born, and it will continue long after we are gone. The conversation is about life itself—about what is real, what’s worth paying attention to, how we should live, and what *“this”* is all about.

When we have listened long enough to have some idea of what the conversation is about, we join it ourselves. Then, in Burke’s words, *“The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

So also for those of us who are Christians. We are all involved in an unending conversation about Jesus. It has gone on from the time of his first followers—a conversation that includes memory, testimony, significance, meaning, application, praise, prayer, and, of course, difference and conflict. The terms of the conversation change over time and from one cultural center to another. The title of an illuminating book by one of the twentieth centuries scholarly giants makes the point: *Jesus Through the Centuries.[[7]](#footnote-7)* How Christians think about and talk about Jesus changes, even as there are some constants.

Indeed for Christians, the unending conversation about Jesus is the most important conversation there is. He is for us the decisive revelation of God—of what can be seen of God’s character and passion *in a human life.* There are (many) other important conversations. But for followers of Jesus, the unending conversation about Jesus is the conversation that matters most.[[8]](#footnote-8)

And what is the conversation about? It’s about *God’s character as embodying compassion and love;* it’s about *mystery and metaphor;* it’s about *God’s passion for the world;* and it’s understanding that *believing* means to *belove* the things that God loves.

*Ascription of Praise—*

*To the ruler of all worlds, undying, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory, forever and ever. Amen.*

1. The clip can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eY5VNDvea1M> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anna Carter Florence, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2,* Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 2013, pp. 69, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary,* Harper, San Francisco, 2006, pp. 184, 185 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 306, 307 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form, 3d ed.,* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1973, pp, 110-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries,* Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary,* Harper, San Francisco, 2006, pp. 310-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)