

Robin Dodge  
Holy Faith, Santa Fe  
12 March 2017

Lent 2 – Year A  
Genesis 12.1-4a  
Psalm 121  
Romans 4.1-5, 13-17  
John 3.1-17

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It may come as no surprise to some of you that as a kid I was a religion geek! I used to go to a Bible class Wednesday afternoons after elementary school. Part of the class involved learning the books of the Bible, competitions to see who could look up a Bible verse the fastest and, of course, memorizing key Bible verses. Well, guess what? One of the first Bible verses we had to memorize was John 3.16, the same verse that is advertised from the stands at most major sports competitions, the same verse that is included as a set of the comfortable words that we hear at each Rite I eucharist, the same verse that Martin Luther called “the Gospel in miniature,” the sixteenth verse of the third chapter of today’s Gospel according to St. John: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

As I grew older and started to read the Bible for myself, I was surprised to learn that John 3.16 does not stand alone – it doesn’t have neon lights around it in the Bible promoting this as the Gospel in miniature – but is set in the context of a larger story, the story of Nicodemus whom we heard about in this morning’s Gospel.

Context is very important – not just for a verse, but for a whole story as well – like this morning’s Gospel story. It’s hard to drop into a story without knowing the context, so I encourage you to read what comes before and what comes after the passages

appointed by the lectionary each week [– either from the Bibles in the pews when you’re waiting for church to begin, or from your own Bible when you get home after church].

Just before today’s Gospel story about Nicodemus, we read that many believed in Jesus because they saw the signs that he was doing, in other words the miracles that Jesus was performing. Jesus didn’t want people to believe in him because of what he did, but because of who he is – the Son of God. We’re told that Jesus would not entrust himself to them because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone, for he himself knew what was in every man. Then we’re told that there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, who came to Jesus by night.

From the context, we know that this encounter isn’t going to turn out well. We just heard that Jesus wasn’t going to trust anyone because he knew what was in the heart of everyone. We know that the Pharisees view Jesus suspiciously. And in John’s Gospel, light is good and dark is bad, so when Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night under the cover of darkness, we know things aren’t going to go well!

But Nicodemus calls Jesus “Rabbi,” a sign of respect, and says “we [presumably the Pharisees] know that you a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Well, we know what Jesus thinks about people who believe in him because of the signs he does, but Nicodemus probably doesn’t realize how right he’s got it when he says that God is with Jesus, since Jesus has come from God.

Jesus responds to Nicodemus: “[U]nless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” And now we have another context problem. The Greek word translated as “anew” can also be translated as “above” or “again.” And Nicodemus

misunderstands and thinks Jesus is talking about a literal second birth from one's mother! Nicodemus says, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" But Jesus explains further, "[U]nless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

And this context presents a challenge to many modern-day Christians. They hear Jesus say that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again – they don't misunderstand it like Nicodemus misunderstood it, thinking you have to enter your mother's womb a second time and be born again – but they don't hear Jesus saying that one must be born anew, born from above, born of water and spirit. Instead, they limit this transformation of rebirth to being born again, or as it is often called, being slain in the Spirit. For them, the true sign of being a Christian is whether or not you can cite a specific date and time when the power of the Holy Spirit came over you and you were no longer a heathen but a child of God.

For us Episcopalians, we understand that this transformation of rebirth with water and Spirit comes in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. When I'm asked if I have been born again, I always say "Yes." And if I'm asked when – I give the date and time of my baptism. So, if you're asked if you have been born again, if you have been baptized, don't hesitate to say "Yes," and tell them the details of your baptism. They may not accept it, but it's Biblical!

After all, Baptism is called the sacrament of new birth. "Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as God's children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God. The outward and visible sign in baptism is water, in which the person is baptized in the name of the

Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...The inward and spiritual grace in baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God's family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit. In the liturgy of baptism, the priest asks God to make the water of baptism holy by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that those who are cleansed from sin and **born again** [emphasis mine] may continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior." (BCP Catechism p. 858)

Those who may not accept this explanation of being born again are trying to limit how God may choose to save, and we all know that God is limitless! Those who say that God saves only through a personal conversion experience by the Holy Spirit sometimes try to harness the power of the Holy Spirit for their own ends, but we know that the Holy Spirit cannot be harnessed. Jesus tells Nicodemus and tells us, "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew [born from above, born again].' The wind [or, in this context, the Spirit] blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit." We as Episcopalians understand that the Holy Spirit will move as it may, and that the Holy Spirit visits us again and again to work in us, among us, and through us to bring about the kingdom of God.

So it is important to remember context. God comes offering salvation to everyone. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that **whoever** [emphasis mine] believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." And just to put John 3.16 in fuller context, hear the verse that comes immediately after: "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." Amen.