

The story just before today's story from John is the story of Jesus going into the Temple and chasing out the moneychangers. In the other gospels, this is the tipping point when the authorities decide they're going to have to get rid of Jesus, and it comes right before his arrest and crucifixion. But in John it's near the beginning of the gospel, and what happens next is that Nicodemus, a "leader of the Jews," comes to see him and find out more about him. Since John calls him a leader of the Jews, we can take him to be a representation of someone in public life. Whether Pharisees were so prominent in Jesus' time is not really germane. In John's time, to speak of a leader of the Jews is to speak of a Pharisee. Nicodemus probably heard about Jesus because of the commotion in the Temple, and he takes an interest in people who make public statements because that's the milieu in which *he* functions. What Jesus did was political, and Nicodemus has political concerns.

What follows is a typically Johannine dense conversation, with misunderstanding on Nicodemus' part and cryptic pronouncements on Jesus' part. The gist of it that I want to focus on is that Nicodemus seems to be trying to follow Jesus' cues to figure out what he's all about, and Jesus seems to want to tell Nicodemus that a transformation of consciousness is required in order to make sense of what God is doing in him. You must be born again, or from above, or anew—apparently the Greek is ambiguous. Some kind of rebirth is necessary. It's not under your control, or anyone else's—the wind blows where it chooses. Nicodemus sort of drops out of the scene as Jesus continues: "For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to

condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Eugene Peterson translates this last verse, "God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again."

So here we have the sophisticated man of the world, Nicodemus, and the cryptic wisdom teacher Jesus, each concerned with the human condition, and each framing it in a different way. How is Jesus trying to reach out to Nicodemus and speak to his real questions, with these mysterious words? He talks about rebirth, and it might be worth reminding ourselves that first births are painful and messy, with lots of blood and other fluids, and a good deal of pushing through the pain. Being born of the Spirit might also be like that, in the sense that we're not in control and it's painful and hopeful at the same time—although being born of the Spirit seems to happen to us repeatedly, as we go through many transformations in our lives. Certainties we'd counted on betray us, or we discover unpleasant things about ourselves, and in order to be born again we have to let those old certainties or identities die. As I thought about what John was trying to signal by making Jesus' interlocutor a "leader of the Jews," I remembered that the Pharisees emerged in about the 3rd century BCE as a reaction against Hellenization. Alexander the Great and his successors wanted to make Greek culture the universal culture, which provoked kind of a rift in Judaism. People who were more engaged with people of other cultures, perhaps more sophisticated, and who didn't get to the Temple often because of distance, saw the advantages and strengths of adapting to Hellenic culture. Jews who were closer to the Temple or perhaps just more insular or didn't

get out much saw the encroachment of Hellenic culture as a threat—a symbol of which was the insistence on putting a statue of Zeus right into the Temple. I think if I'd been there, I probably would have been one of the Hellenists, because I'm interested in learning from others' cultures, and I value the ability to communicate easily with lots of different kinds of people. And yet I don't like the idea that I would have been willing to let a statue of Zeus go up in the Temple. The early Pharisees were those who wanted to protect the Temple and religious practice from what they saw as corruption. That was still their mission in the time of Jesus, but now the political milieu was the Roman empire. Things change, but things remain the same, and I keep seeing Nicodemus as a person deeply enmeshed in this complicated political/religious struggle that had been going on now for several hundred years, neither side clearly right *or* clearly viable. He's a man in public life who doesn't see a lot of good options to pursue.

Jesus says to him, "You can't see a way forward because you don't know how to see. "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" But God loves the world so much, God is giving everything in order to save it. You should know that when John refers to the world, the *kosmos*, he's referring to something deeply corrupted. "The world" is hostile to God, in John. But God loves the world. This is what Martin Niemoller meant when he said, "It took me a long time to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. He is not even the enemy of His enemies." God is not even the enemy of God's enemies. "The reason this Son of Humanity is "lifted up" is because God unconditionally loves the cosmos--the entire universe, the whole creation. The love

of God includes everything in creation--people, animals, rivers, streams, birds, wheat fields, and even old bottles alongside the road.”

http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2012/05/lectionary-blogging-john-3-1-17.html

And that audacious, perhaps crazy, character of God’s love is probably *why* it saves.

We all love Krista Tippett, and one of the many reasons is that she really sees very clearly how desperately broken and endangered the world is, and she does not despair. Recently I was surprised/not surprised to see that she was the guest on a weekly podcast by Ezra Klein, who is a political journalist. What, I asked myself, is Ezra Klein doing interviewing Krista Tippett? How did he even know that she existed? Well, I’d forgotten that she started out as a political journalist, and was in East Berlin when the Wall fell. But Klein knew what she’d been doing since then, and in introducing the episode he said, “I’ve been wanting to talk with Tippett because this is a moment that challenges our humanity as we engage in the daily thrum of politics. Trump makes everything he touches a bit Trumpier, he calls on our worst selves, he makes it seem more acceptable—even more necessary—to act more like him. And he degrades all of us in the process. It has never, to me, felt harder to keep hold of decency in public life than it is now. This is something Tippett has rare skill at.”

So I listened to the podcast, which tragically does not have a transcript that I could consult for this sermon, and Ezra Klein played Nicodemus to Krista Tippett’s Jesus. She agreed that our public life is degraded and that there is existential threat to the planet and to democracy, but she also offered evidence that wisdom is more accessible and more powerful than a life in political journalism might lead one to

believe. In a sense, she was arguing that to live in this world constructively, you have to know that God loves the world in the way that Niemoller meant, and you have to expect painful, messy rebirths. She is not an answer lady, and it wasn't that glib—but it did echo Jesus' response to Nicodemus.

Nicodemus first says to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." He opens with a reference to miracles like water into wine at Cana. But these are not miracles so much as they are signs: they represent what God is about for us. And Jesus rejects Nicodemus' reliance on the miracles as a clue to his power. As a person involved in public life, and a Pharisee whose cause, keeping the Temple from corruption, has not been going well for several hundred years, Nicodemus is understandably interested in the way Jesus plans to wield power. But Jesus is not interested in competing in the marketplace of miracle-workers. He is seeking to build community on the foundation of a God who even loves enemies. He obviously also recognizes and cares about the corruption of the Temple, or he wouldn't have made the big ruckus there the previous day. Jesus *is* pained by what is happening to the institutions that are supposed to nourish the people. But that's not where the real work is taking place. The real work of God is taking place as people undergo the transformation of operating out of limitless love. The means of transformation is relationship, and the motive and end are love. It would be better if the Temple were not corrupted, and it would be better if lots of public structures were re-arranged, and it's very important to work on those things. But they are not *vital* to the work that God is doing; God will get it done no matter what. That's the

wisdom that gives us reason to be hopeful, even as we see clearly all the reasons for despair.

Let us pray: Birthing God,

You gave us new life when we were born of water and Spirit. Help us live into that new life, refreshed and renewed for your work. Amen.