

A Strange Sort of Lifting up

Psalm 107:1-3; 17-22

John 3:1-15

Thomas Long, a distinguished professor of preaching, advocated for story-telling and imagery in sermons. Yet he also admitted that occasionally a sermon's Bible passages require meticulous interpretation if the preacher wishes to remain faithful to the text. "Sometimes," he said, "you just have to 'run the passage'." He meant that sometimes passages have so much packed into them they require a thorough working through. Today we need to run John 3:1-15.

First, its context. It follows hard on the heels of John 2:13-22, in which Jesus makes a whip and drives the money changers out of the Temple, overturning their tables and making a big entrance into the consciousness of his people. Far from driving all of them away, we now learn that a VIP is drawn irresistibly to him. And they have the conversation we will "run through" in a moment. But first, immediately after our passage comes the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." This statement contains the reason Jesus made such a ruckus at the Temple. He has come to save. But before he can inspire faith and faithful following in the people, he must gain their attention—and hold it.

John 3:1: “Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.” Enter Nicodemus. He is a Pharisee. The Pharisees served as Jesus’ most common foil in the Gospels. He sparred with them. Eventually, having had enough of his ability to point out their hypocrisy and misunderstanding of the Old Testament, they became instrumental in getting him killed on the cross. Yet we need to give the Pharisees their due. New Testament scholar Daniel Migliore, in his book, Faith Seeking Understanding, writes, “The Pharisees were on the whole the most spiritually-minded of the Jewish sects of Jesus’ day. They studied the Old Testament, memorizing great portions of it. If they tended to become legalistic in their interpretation of it, nevertheless they tried harder than any other sect known to us *to live according to its teachings.*”

Nicodemus would seem to fit this description. But before we can go farther we must also note that John called him “a ruler of the people”. This refers to Nicodemus’ position as a member of the Sanhedrin, the council in Jerusalem, the highest Jewish authority under the Romans. Nicodemus truly was a VIP. Jesus message had reached people from all strata of society, including the very “highest”. John 3:2: “This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him'.” First, Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness. He snuck out. And he did so not despite his high position *but because of it*. While as a powerful man he would not need to fear for his safety, he did fear that others in high places might learn he had gone to Jesus. What would they think? How might it affect his influence?

Second, Nicodemus said that we know Jesus must have come from God. More than one Pharisee felt the same way. And in order for him to know this they must have talked about it to a few trusted others. He added that they knew Jesus came from God because of the “signs” he did. Jesus had already turned water into wine—a miracle by any definition. Perhaps he had done other mighty works not recorded in John. Yet even his disturbance of the Temple routine would qualify as a sign. Only a fool or a person who genuinely “came from God” could pull off such a disturbance. Nicodemus and a few of his fellow Pharisees thought the latter.

John 3:3: “Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born anew that one cannot see the kingdom of God.'” Let us address this last part first. What is the kingdom of God? Our Reformed Tradition teaches that the kingdom is where we enter into the direct presence of God. It offers bliss and blessing. It lasts forever. And it has a curious double identity. It is both “here” and “there”, wherever “there” is. (There undoubtedly refers to heaven, whose location—which we have always thought of as “up there”—we do not know.) It has broken into this world. In fact, the Gospels of Matthew and Mark put forward the idea that Jesus inaugurated the kingdom among us with his birth into our reality. Yet it has not fully arrived here and now. Obviously. Which brings us to the second facet of its double identity. The kingdom of God is both now and forever. While it has only gotten started it has in fact started to appear. Its consummation, however, awaits the return of Christ to this world.

The second important point in John 3:3 comes with the words “born anew”. This

phrase takes the place of more traditional translations' rendering of Jesus' phrase as "born again". The Aramaic these two men likely spoke allows for either translation. Clearly Nicodemus thought so, because he took it literally. He knew a full-grown man could not enter his mother's womb a second time. Jesus' interpretation in verse 5 makes it plain that "born anew" fit his meaning more accurately: "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, that one cannot enter the kingdom of God." This new birth does not involve physical, but *spiritual* birth. While "born again" could incorporate this understanding, "born anew" better conveys it—and it avoids certain ideas prevalent in some churches which we find curious and even misguided.

What did Jesus mean by "water and the Spirit"? While various interpretations exist, the best fit for Jesus' entire teaching is that "water" referred to the waters of *baptism*. We believe that baptism itself does not save us. Yet it serves as a powerful symbol that God has already saved us when we live in faith. The infant baptism we observe relies on the faith of the parents. Youth and adult baptism rely on the faith of the one getting baptized. The waters of baptism remind us that in Christ, we are washed from our sins. We still commit them, yet out of love and grace, *when we believe in Jesus*, God holds us close. Note that Jesus also said, "*the Spirit*", and that John capitalized spirit. This is a clear reference to God's Holy Spirit, God among us here and now. After all, when Jesus got baptized in the River Jordan, the Holy Spirit came upon him in the form of a dove and spoke.

Verses seven and eight verify the truth of this understanding. Jesus made

intentional use of the double meaning of the Aramaic word for “spirit”. It could also mean “wind”, or even “breath of God”. Genesis 1:2: “...and the Spirit of God was moving upon the waters.” That same word for Spirit appears there. And in fact Hebrew and Greek also used words with the same set of meanings. That Spirit/wind/breath of God created all that exists. In our passage Jesus claimed that Spirit participated in believers getting born anew, receiving a new and powerful experience of the presence of God, of God's kingdom, of the spiritual life.

The next several verses contain more of Nicodemus' struggle to understand what Jesus was trying to tell him. We will pass over them, as they offer little additional information for us. But we must look at verses 14 and 15. John 3:14: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.” This refers to an incident from the book of Numbers, during the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt. After years of wandering through the harsh Sinai Peninsula, they grumble yet again to God and Moses. Suddenly they walk into a nest of deadly vipers. Many get bitten. Not a few die. Moses petitions God for relief. God tells Moses to kill a snake and raise it his on a forked pole. When Moses obeys, the snakes stop biting and those people already bitten recover. A sacrificial offering saves the people.

While Nicodemus had no way to understand Jesus' use of this story, we do. We know Jesus meant that he would perform a similar action when he accepted the cross. He would be “lifted up” himself. Indeed, the prophets Isaiah and Zachariah wrote of visions the Lord had given them of the Messiah “being raised”. While they probably

thought this meant he would receive the acclamation of the people and achieve exalted status in Israel, Jesus knew the truth—and so do we. He accomplished a strange sort of lifting up. In order to usher the full reality of the kingdom of God into believers, he would be nailed to two poles and get lifted up. And his self-sacrifice would accomplish God's ultimate purpose. John 3:15: “that whoever believes in (the Son of Man, him, Jesus) may have eternal life.”

In retrospect, God's complex, eternal plan often appears so much clearer than it does when we look into the future. The Spirit moved over the waters at creation. Moses killed a snake and lifted it up to protect the people he led. Prophets passed along visions from God they almost certainly did not understand. Jesus understood, and he made it plain that the hinge it all swings on is faith. Which brings us to the point of this passage for us. We still live between knowledge of the past and the mysteries of the future. We always will. All we can do is trust God. Have faith in God's plan. Jesus himself said, “that whoever *believes*...may have eternal life.” And he will repeat this in the next verse, the famous John 3:16.

Seek faith. Pray for it, certainly. For many of us, one powerful method of gaining—and maintaining—faith is hanging out with other believers. The fellowship of the church turns out to have tremendous importance. Not only does fellowship offer us the consolation and support of fellow believers, it helps create that faith. Come to church, on Sundays and other days. You will find that belief in the Son of man, Jesus, the one who got lifted up on the cross, will sustain you through this often dark world.