

“Come and See What You Can Be”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Edina Morningside Community Church; January 28, 2018

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “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.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may 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.

The global visionary, humanitarian, and writer Danaan Parry uses the imagery of a trapeze artist to describe how humans navigate through growth and change. He swings along, [Parry writes](#), hanging from a bar that symbolize confidence and certainty. But then the trapeze artist sees another bar swinging towards him. “...I know, in that place in me that knows, that this new trapeze bar has my name on it. It is my next step, my growth, my aliveness coming to get me. In my heart of hearts I know that, for me to grow, I must release my grip on this present, well-known bar and move to the new one.” But letting go of a thing that’s certain requires surrendering control and knowledge. It means hovering in a space where the past is past, but the future is not yet seen. Parry concludes, “Perhaps this is the essence of what the mystics call the faith experience. No guarantees, no net, no insurance policy, but you do it anyway because somehow to keep hanging on to that old bar is no longer on the list of alternatives. So, for an eternity that can last a microsecond or a thousand lifetimes, I soar across the dark void of ‘the past is gone, the future is not yet here.’”

Nicodemus is swinging up on the bar that’s certain, but he sees another bar in sight, so he comes to Jesus under cover of night. Nicodemus, we read, is “a Pharisee” and “a leader of the Jews”. He is a learned man, with a whole library of experience and reference to the historical knowledge of his people. His own name, translated, means “conqueror of the people.” “In other words,” one writer says, “Nicodemus is a ‘king of the hill.’ He’s a man ‘on top.’ He’s secured that often coveted place of status, financial security and respectability. He’s not really on a path; he’s ‘made it.’”¹ Yet Nicodemus recognizes that there’s something new before him in Jesus. He seeks to understand the path that Jesus sets forth, but does so privately—at night—because he’s sure his peers will judge him for considering an alternative to the fixed path of certainty. My friend and fellow UCC minister John Allen, [writes](#) that “His behavior suggests that he knew

¹ Faith Works, *Storylines*, “Home By Another Way: A Bible Study for Epiphany”, 2017-2018, 27. Available online at faithworksgroups.com.

he was defecting, at least in some small way, by going to speak with this radical Rabbi, and Jesus does not disappoint. He calls Nicodemus to walk away from the power and privilege of his leadership position and join a lost cause for justice and liberation, to cast in his lot with outcasts.” That’s the leap that Jesus calls forth from Nicodemus: let go of the trapeze bar of his titles, privilege, rank and status, in order to grab a new and humble bar which Christ was on.

Jesus describes the whole-life transformation this involves: you must be reborn. The Greek word here, *anōthen*, contains a universe of meanings. It suggests “born from above”, “born again”, and “born anew.” This is what’s necessary to “see the kingdom of God”, Jesus says to Nicodemus. Whereas he’s used to a life of knowledge, certainty, order and tradition, Jesus calls Nicodemus to a new life of surrender and vulnerability—like trusting the water and the wind to carry a person where it chooses.² These days, language about being “born again” stirs up unwelcome controversy about who’s had a “born-again religious experience” and who has not. It helps me to understand the Jesus invitation this way: begin living a new life, or living in a new way. In Bible study this week, we came up with a metaphor from the world of technology. Being born anew is like being rebooted, debugged, or reformatted, as a computer would be. It’s not about “being saved” in the eternal sense of calling “dibs” on a seat in heaven, but a changing of the heart in this life, and a desire to start again right here and now. “To be born again”, [John Allen writes](#), “is to enter the world with a new set of guiding principles, a new way of approaching everything, and a radically altered perception.”

What ways are we invited—or called out by Jesus—to start anew this day? The question comes to us individually, as a congregation, and as a church more broadly. Yesterday I gathered in retreat with fifteen other Board members and staff of the Minnesota Conference, our statewide network in the United Church of Christ. We were there to begin a months-long discernment process, asking what God is up to now in our society, our state and our churches. Together we prayed and sought to grasp what the church of the future might be, and what it might need from a connectional body like the Minnesota Conference. The only certainties we have are that change will accelerate in church and society, that we are called to adapt further, and that the joyful, transformative mission of Jesus Christ will continue in new, still-undiscovered ways.

In our group this past week, the Tuesday morning Bible study suggested ways that we may be called into something new as a congregation. What would it look like for us to receive as daunting a summons as Nicodemus does from Jesus? One person wondered if it was the challenge of changing musical commitments and styles in worship. Another said perhaps we’re called to reexamine the value of a church building itself. A third wonders about the place of ancient Scripture in our modern life. These are just some of the paradigm shifts we’re challenged to consider, moving from “top of the mountain” Nicodemus to a vulnerable new birth.

So much for community examples, but what new leap is called forth in *you* today? What are *you* challenged to leave behind, to leap toward? Do you hear the invitation to a robust faith marked by personal, vulnerable commitment, rather than just the received habits of our traditions and ancestors? Perhaps it’s the unwelcome prod of a discontinued job, the slow healing from an injury, or the foreign fields of grief at a loved one’s loss. Or, in the helpful reframing of one commentator, “What if ‘born anew’ is not about leaving your old life completely behind? What if it’s about finding a way to bring rebirth to the life, relationship or job you’ve got? Sometimes leaving it all behind is the way forward. Other times, our dreams of leaving blind us to opportunities to rebirth what we have.”³ Are you prompted to see anew, seeing possibility instead of despair, looking for love in the face of apathy, seeing reconciliation and peace where there may now be only violence? Does seeing the world differently call you to act differently,

² Faith Works, 27.

³ Faith Works, 28.

manifesting forgiveness, offering hope, and participating in the healing of community? What leap are *you* called to make? Come and see what you can be at the invitation of Jesus, leaping from used-up certainty to open-ended possibility, swinging with the Holy Spirit.

We can do any of these new things—or something altogether different—only because we swing above a net that is beyond our understanding and control. We overhear with Nicodemus the saving love which is God’s grace, whether we are on this bar, the next one, or hovering in between them. *God* chose to make the leap from heaven afar to this world with us in Jesus Christ, because “God so loved the world”. And furthermore, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” In other words, the gift of God in Jesus Christ must not become a snare used to condemn or cast out those who are not in the Christian fold. Rather, it is a safety net of forgiveness, healing and compassion that Jesus spreads out below us on this daring discipleship path. Let us then trust the amazing grace of God, and take the great leap of faith when the invitation is before us. Let us, too, be born anew! Amen.