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Year A, 2 Lent – John 3:1-17  
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I would venture to say that this morning's gospel reading pushes buttons for some of us. For one thing, it concludes with what might be the most famous verse in the New Testament, John 3:16. "*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.*" This verse pops up on t-shirts, billboards, and signs at ball games. It is as if it is the logo for the Christian brand. In its familiarity, it loses its meaning and threatens to become off-putting for those of us who choose not to summarize our faith in a sticker on the back of our cars.

Then there is theme of being "born again." In certain circles, this question of whether one is born again is code for "Are you saved, like us?" This language can function as a litmus test for what kind of Christian one is or whether one is truly a Christian at all. Too often in Christian history, the distinction of being "born again" is used as a basis for exclusion and judgment.

That language, combined with overuse of John 3:16, might tempt us to write off this Gospel passage. But if we can get beyond these triggers and look at the text in its larger context, we will find a rich and even humorous conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus – a conversation that speaks to our own faith, even if we aren't inclined to wear it on a t-shirt. The gospel writer John tells us that Nicodemus was a leader in the Jewish community. This would likely mean that he was successful and highly respected, as well as being part of the establishment that Jesus was challenging. It explains why Nicodemus chose to come covertly to see Jesus in the dark of the night.

This is the context in which their conversation unfolds. Nicodemus begins, saying "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 is there because he recognizes that Jesus was not your average run-of-mill prophet; this man was mediating the presence of God. Jesus responds with a surprising and provocative metaphor. He likens faith to new birth, saying, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus, bless his heart, is confused. He takes the words literally and asks the stupid question: "How can an old man like me return to my mother's womb to come out again?" Jesus chides him in return and explains that the kind of new birth he is talking about is a spiritual one.

Faithfulness, Jesus is saying, isn't about following the letter of the law as Nicodemus had spent his life doing. Nor is it about saying the right prayers or proclamation of faith. It isn't about *doing* anything. Instead, Jesus is explaining that faithfulness is about allowing God to work in our lives. It is about being open to the transformation that comes from life in Christ.

This kind of rebirth doesn't necessarily come as a command from Jesus, as many have interpreted. It seems to me to come as an invitation. We are invited, like Nicodemus, to come to Jesus in the dark of the night, curious but uncertain. We are invited to open our hearts and minds

to where God might be calling us to a deeper faith. We are invited to allow ourselves to be broken open by the love and grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. In this way, the metaphor of birth is appropriate. Jesus is pushing us from infancy toward a more mature faith. Or, to use John's frequent theme, from darkness into light. Jesus is clear that we do not make this transformation on our own. As scholar Deborah Kapp says, "Rebirth is God's gift to give, God's work to accomplish, and it is God who labors to bring us new life."

If the story of Nicodemus is any indication, this transformation is often not instantaneous. Nicodemus left his meeting with Jesus just as he'd come – in the dark of the night. He returns to his life as a leader in the Jewish establishment. He appears briefly again in chapter 7, but there is no account of a sudden conversion or a lightning bolt moment. Something must have slowly changed in him, though, because he appears once again in a profound moment at the end of John's gospel. After the crucifixion, all of the disciples had fled for fear of persecution. And yet, it is then that Nicodemus comes. He joins Joseph of Arimathea in the light of day to remove Jesus from the cross. He brings an extraordinary quantity of spices, to lovingly prepare the body. He and Joseph follow the Jewish burial customs, and then they lay Jesus in tomb.

Somehow, Nicodemus was born anew. He found his way from darkness to light, from the confusion of today's gospel to bearing the body of his crucified Lord to the grave. His story offers a version of what it means to be born again that is very different than the one we so often hear. It suggests that it often is not something that happens in an instant, but rather a journey of transformation, of allowing God to work in our lives, of moving between infancy and maturity, between darkness and light, over and over again as we try to live faithfully. May we be open to this kind of new life. Amen.