



Coming to Trust that New Life is Possible

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn for St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church
March 8, 2020, the Second Sunday in Lent, Exodus 3:1-15 and John 3:1-17*

Almost everything about today's gospel text from John is not only well-known, but has also been reduced to one-dimensional slogans in popular culture. Let's begin with the phrase "born again," which you'll notice does not actually occur in today's translation of the text, but which is another way to translate what in our text says "born from above." What do you think of when you hear the phrase "born again"? Some of us associate that phrase exclusively with evangelical Christianity, or with the politically religious right, or with the belief that the Christian life is best expressed by a personal and emotional moment in time in which one experiences a conversion. And then there is the whole notion of believing in Jesus for the primary purpose of getting into heaven after you die, which is what many people think is the primary meaning of the phrase "eternal life." In order to get into heaven, so popular perception of this text goes, one has to believe a whole lot of things that are impossible according to science, and that are confusing even if they were possible. And one has to be one hundred percent convinced of the literal truth of the stories in the Bible and the doctrines of the church.

From my perspective the great tragedy is that none of these positions captures what I think is a truly faithful understanding of this text. In fact, this text from John's gospel is actually one of the richest, most beautiful passages in the Christian Bible. I am going to put all my cards on the table and say that I think we should reclaim this beautiful text for all its richness and nuance, because it describes a spiritual reality that is not only priceless and real, but it's a reality that we desperately need.

And so, to explore what I think Jesus means when he talks about being born from above, we're not going to start with Nicodemus, even though I love Nicodemus and think he is the closest thing to a modern day Episcopalian we can find in scripture. Instead, let's go back to Moses. As you all know, for the eight weeks before Holy Week, we have been exploring the ancient story of the liberation of Israelite slaves from Egypt. The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years, which in my mind creates a curious parallel with American history and the fact that the first slave ship arrived in modern day Virginia 400 years ago. After 400 years, there is a time of reckoning. Moses cares about his people and their slavery, but due to a brash and reckless reaction on his part in which he kills an Egyptian who had been abusing an Israelite, he has spent the past 40 years in exile in the desert in Midian, where instead of being part of the Pharaoh's rich temple life or helping his people, he is herding sheep. Which brings us to today's story. Moses is out in the desert taking care of his sheep when he comes to Horeb, the mountain of God. And he sees a bush that is burning but that is not being consumed. And he lets himself be interrupted, and he turns aside to look. And when he gets to the burning bush, God tells him to go back to Egypt because God wants to liberate the slaves through him.

We've been exploring the spiritual practice "turn" in the life of Moses, and this story surely captures one of the greatest "turns" a person can make. The practice turn is about transformation. Mostly, I think it refers to small adjustments we make in everyday life, with God's help, in order to focus our attention and intention and actions on the presence and purposes of God for us. But every once in a long time, the practice turn is about something truly enormous and life-changing. It's about something so fundamentally significant that to make such a turn is akin to beginning life anew. To be reborn. This is the kind of turn Moses experiences in today's story from Exodus, and here is the thing. Even though this turn radically changes the course of Moses's life, it isn't for him. It's for the whole community.

And how is it that Moses and God collaborate in this turn?

It starts with curiosity, pausing, and a willingness to let go his own agenda. Moses sees this bush burning and he allows himself to be interrupted by it. He pauses, gets curious, and moves toward it. Then Moses and God have a conversation which I actually find hilarious. We don't have the whole story in today's reading, but boiled down to its essence here's how the conversation goes, and I paraphrase:

God says to Moses: **I've seen my people suffering and I'm going to liberate them. So I'm sending you to Pharaoh to get it done.**

Moses: Who am I to do this?

God: **Don't worry, I'll be with you.**

Moses: Meaning no disrespect but who ARE you?

God: **I am who I am, and I'm the God of your ancestors.**

Moses: They're not going to believe you sent me.

God: **Here are some signs you can do that will help them believe.**

Moses: I'm not good at public speaking.

God: **I made your mouth; you'll be fine.**

Moses: Please choose someone else.

God: **Your brother Aaron can go with you; here he is, now get moving.**

What I love about this is that Moses didn't turn because he was 100% convinced of anything. It happened because God called him. The same is true for us. Turning happens in the middle of ambiguity and doubt and inadequacy and fear. It happens because there is a change in the life of the world that God wants to bring about, and God always and only acts through people to accomplish God's purposes. God acts through you and me and our neighbors to accomplish healing and liberation in the world.

Both Moses and Nicodemus in John's gospel model for us the beginning of a life of faith. The Greek word for believing is exactly the same word as trusting, and is even used to describe "entrusting oneself" to someone else. In John's gospel it is clear that this believing, this trusting in Christ is the key to having life—a life that begins now, in being born of God's Spirit. But as all of us know, trust is a process that takes time. It comes in stages. This kind of trust, or faith, is less about intellectual certainty and more about a profound knowing that enables us to turn and to take risks on the basis of it. It's what Carl Jung meant when he was asked if he believed in God. Jung said he didn't believe. He *knew*.

That kind of trust – a trust in God's promises for a life that is complete, full of abundant joy, the kind of trust that enables you to risk things to follow Jesus, to follow the Spirit – is the best way to understand what John's gospel calls "believing". Trust's opposite is not fear, but control and complete self-reliance. And the ability to step out in that kind of faith creates newness of life that can best be captured by the metaphor of birth.

Being born isn't a choice that any of us make. It just happens to us by an everyday miracle that none of us fully understands. We move from being snug and warm in our mothers' wombs to seeing the light of day. One minute we're snug and warm and maybe really cramped in our mother's wombs; then we go through a long painful messy process and we see the light of day. One minute we are infants held in our parents' arms; the next minute we are being baptized, marked as Christ's own, forever. ...

One minute we are skeptical and can't imagine trusting a God we can't see with anything; and then slowly, over time, we come to discover that there is a God we can trust, a God we can take risks for, and we don't know how that shift happens – only that it is a gift from God.

So I want to invite us to reclaim the notion of believing in Jesus as entrusting our individual and communal lives to Christ, enough that we are willing to take risks in his name. Sometimes those risks are big and bold and dramatic. If you are following the lent madness you will see that kind of bold trust and risk in the lives of some of the saints we encountered this week. There was Herman, a Russian monk who was called to minister to the Aleut people in the Kodiak Islands of Alaska. So he walked across all of Russia from St. Petersburg to Siberia and took a boat from there to Alaska. He defended the Aleut people against Russian oppression, even nursing them during an epidemic in 1819 without a thought for his own safety. There was Eva Lee Matthews, an Anglican nun who served impoverished women and children in Ohio. There was Elizabeth the mother of our namesake St. John who believed God could give her a child even though she was barren and elderly. Next week we will encounter Harriet Tubman who escaped slavery and risked her life many times to save other slaves.

But just as often, the trust to which God invites us involves smaller and less dramatic opportunities to “turn”. We in the St. John's Lenten story groups are exploring our own stories of transformation and even repentance. We are also going to get to know some of our Latinex Episcopal brothers and sisters at St. Nicholas / San Nicolas in Richfield, to trade stories with them and risk reaching out across lines of difference. We are doing this because during lent, we're called to look at our own lives and our own stories honestly, for the sake of repentance and healing. We are doing this because as Christians we believe immigrants are not outsiders to be resented and rejected but strangers to be embraced and befriended.

All of these “turns,” both the big and the small, take trust. So where do you find it difficult to trust, especially to trust in God? What would it take for you to imagine that trusting God need not involve blind faith, but a process of slowly following a way that leads to life, step by step? In the end, this trust, this faith, is rooted in God’s love. God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, that whoever entrusts themselves to him will not perish, but have eternal life. I invite you to allow these words to linger in your consciousness, to meet them as if for the first time. Allow these words to be liberated from the cultural and theological constraints in which you have heard them in the past. Allow them to liberate you to come to believe in a power greater than yourself, which can restore you and the world to life. Amen.