

Genesis 12:1-4a
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
Psalm 121
John 3:1-17

Lent 2A
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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Born Again

Lenten blessings! Are you reading our daily Lenten reflections? Pretty wonderful, aren't they? Thank you again to all the reflection writers – your reflections are such a blessing to this community. I think reflection writing is a bit like sermon writing. Sometimes words can pour out of me, seeming to come from somewhere beyond myself. Sometimes I can only stare at the blank screen waiting for a word or even an idea to begin with. And sometimes I just struggle with the text, not having any idea how to bring it to life. I imagine you reflection writers might have found yourselves in similar places. I recently had a conversation with Peggy about that very thing. She and Kirk were assigned perhaps the most well-known piece of scripture in the bible, John 3:16, as their reflection passage. *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.*

I've had many rich spiritual and theological conversations with Peggy, and I know she loves the scriptures. So you'd think the most well-known verse in the bible would be easy for her to write about. But she told me she had a very hard time with it, and that's because she wanted to do justice to a beautiful piece of scripture that has been trivialized, abused and misused. It's been used as a wedge to drive communities apart. It's been printed on t-shirts and coffee mugs and giant signs that are waved by body-painted, half-naked men at major sportsball events. It's been used to tell me that I am not a real Christian because I haven't had the requisite charismatic experience of "being saved." Their reflection does indeed reclaim that beautiful piece of scripture. Their reflection is beautiful, as all of them are, and reminds us of God's deep desire to be in relationship with us.

I think this whole story, John 3:1-17, not just John 3:16 is about relationship, particularly Jesus' desire to be in relationship with Nicodemus. After all, Jesus didn't just give him John 3:16, he gave him so much more, and all of it, astonishing, even to the scholarly Nicodemus.

Do you ever wonder what Nicodemus was doing, searching for Jesus in the dark of night? I wonder if he didn't want to be seen. He was a Pharisee after all, and while it's true that every single Pharisee wasn't out to get rid of Jesus, the ones who weren't threatened by him were few and far-between. But something in Jesus compelled Nicodemus to seek him out that night. And when Nicodemus found Jesus, he began to speak to him in the same way some of the other Pharisees had... leading with flattery that would often end in attempted entrapment. But no sooner had Nicodemus offered his opening remarks ... "*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 cut him off. "*You can't even see the kingdom of God unless you are born from above.*" Well, that stumped him. And instead of continuing down a conversational path he may have intended, Nicodemus, utterly bewildered, began to ask questions about what Jesus could possibly have meant. I wonder if the thought of being born again evoked some sort of longing in Nicodemus. I wonder if he wanted a do-over for certain parts of his life. That's what comes to

me when I hear the words “born again.” For me, they aren’t a litmus test for true-believer Christianity. Instead, they sound to me like words of promise and hope from a generous and loving God.

Well, whatever the reason, Nicodemus was curious about Jesus and likely set out to have a good, intellectual conversation with the itinerant rabbi. But that’s not how it went. I think it’s interesting that Jesus didn’t try to explain things more clearly, didn’t try to talk to Nicodemus in a scholarly or even linear sort of way, a way that would have made it easier for Nicodemus to “understand.” He did quite the opposite, really. The more Jesus talked, the more mysterious the conversation became. The wind blows, you don’t know where it’s come from or where it’s going, that’s what happens with everyone who’s born from above. The Spirit blows where she will, you can’t possibly contain it. What does that even mean? All Nicodemus could come up with is “How can this be?” And still Jesus refused to bring the conversation down to a rudimentary or even comprehensible level. Instead, he went on with even more puzzling words - “The Son of Man will be lifted up, everyone who believes in him will have eternal life, and God wants to save, rather than condemn the world.” Hmmmm.

Now I know my job is to help us make sense of scripture, and I take that very seriously. But I also have to say that doesn’t necessarily mean we’ll end up “understanding” it. Some things we experience more than we understand. Birth, crocuses poking up through the snow, a glorious sunrise, dancing bees, Jesus present in the bread and wine of communion, Jesus present in us. This is God we are talking about, and just like the gospel says, the Spirit blows where she will and we cannot contain it. There is mystery here. There are great unknowns here. This is precisely the place to be astonished, surprised and maybe even confused. Such things cannot be explained or even described – there really are no words for the mystery that is God. And while we do well to try, anything I say is inadequate to the task, and that is just as it should be.

Sometimes, when I walk into the church and nobody else is here, when I smell the brick and the wood and the candles and the chrism, when I see the light streaming in through the stained glass windows, when I feel all the prayers that have been prayed in this place, I know without question that I am in the presence of the Holy. This isn’t something I understand. It’s something I experience. It happens when we’re all together here too, especially in the moments of silence between the prayers, after the readings, after preaching. In the quiet, in the music, in the praying and the preaching, the mystery that is God envelopes us and knits us into one body and that too is a mystery. This is one of the things I love the best about St Barnabas... when we’re here, together in this place, it is very different from being out there. That is not to say that we live different lives on Sunday than we do Monday through Saturday, or that one place is better than the other. They’re just different. Sundays are here, this place is here, we are together here to be transformed and equipped to do the work God has given us to do Monday through Saturday. We don’t have church lives and secular lives, we simply have our lives in God. But this is holy ground, consecrated and set apart for God. To be here is to know ourselves as different and set apart. And that is something I have no desire to explain.

Some of us have learned that being a Christian means assenting to the “right” things, things in creeds, things in scripture, even things in the prayer book. Some of us have learned that being a good Christian means we had to believe what our particular believing community, or overbearing

pastor, or even the Pope would have us believe. But for me, none of that has much of anything at all to do with God's boundless love for us, or the way Jesus lived and teaches us to live, or with my deep and abiding longing for the mystery whose name is Love.

This doesn't mean I can't affirm my faith in the words of the Nicene creed, of course I can. But the longer I live into my Christian identity, the more I realize that getting the creedal or theological particulars right simply isn't what I'm paying the most attention to. I want to grow into a Christianity that is deep and rich and broad and wide, mysterious and mystical and only of Love because God is all of those things. I want to grow into a Christianity that affirms the church as defined in the creeds and affirms the reality that my inexhaustible longing for God has very little to do with them.

In her 2013 book, *Christianity after Religion*, Diana Butler Bass talks about the etymology for our language of faith. The word "faith" itself is akin to fidelity, personal loyalty. The word "doctrine" comes from the same root as the word doctor, a word that for me invokes healing rather than separating right thinking from wrong thinking. The word "creed" comes from *credo* which does not mean statements that are absolute. It means *I give my heart to*. And "belief," that very important word in John 3:16, the only piece of scripture required for so many who call themselves Christians, actually comes from the German word "belieben," which means believing. Be-loving.

So 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,*' might actually be best understood as the "promise of eternal life to all who entrust their lives to Jesus, not those who agree with certain statements about Jesus."¹ Relationships rather than rules were always primary with Jesus. I think that's why the conversation with Nicodemus went the way it did that dark night. Jesus didn't just tell Nicodemus he had to be born again. He invited Nicodemus into relationship and into the mystery that is God. And he makes that invitation to us, too.

This Lenten season we're invited once again to repent, to reorient, to begin again, to be born again. Born again into the beautiful, beloved family of God, born again into the fullness of ourselves as God created us to be, born again and again and again into mystery that is Love. Amen.

¹ <http://smootpage.blogspot.com/2015/02/believing-beloving-diana-butler-bass.html>