

The Call of the Midwife

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John 3:1-17

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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. (John 3:1-17, NRSV)

We are respectable people, right?

We dress respectably.

We act respectably.

We speak respectably.

We're well-read,

well-known,

well-connected.

well-adjusted,

well-intentioned,

well-informed,

well-groomed,

and, if we must say so ourselves, well-respected.

We're respectively respectably reputable.

And we have found Jesus to be . . . impressive.

I mean, he supplied that fine wine just in time
at that wedding, in Cana.
He was the life of the party.
But he quickly showed that he isn't one to play to the crowds.
No, right after that, he went to Jerusalem
and turned the tables on the temple. Literally.
Now, there's an orderly, respectable way to register complaints,
and we don't condone the sorts of protests
that might could possibly damage property,
but . . . we've got to admit,
Jesus does have a way of getting your attention.

We have seen Jesus' miracles,
we have heard what he's been teaching,
we have observed his follower count rise,
we have even been with people who say they'd trust their lives to him –
he's an influencer, no doubt about it.
and so, with all of that, you could say that we're ... curious.
I mean, he's got potential.

So we want to meet him.
You know, to vet him a little bit,
to make sure he's got his theology down,
that he's . . . respectable.
After all, we take the Bible seriously.
We know the scriptures.
Some people have even called us "The People of the Book."

That's why we of all people don't go running after the latest miracle worker.
We've got our positions to protect,
our reputations to uphold,
our 401k's to maintain.
We respectable people have to be careful before we give our stamp of approval.
That's why we desire a private meeting,
away from the unwashed masses,
at a time when others won't see us.
So we go to Jesus at night.
He's staying at the house of a friend of a friend,
because, we've been told, there was no room for him at the Holiday Inn.

He welcomes us in, invites us to sit with him at the table,
and sets before us some pieces of bread and fish.
We say "please there's no need,"
but he says that he's got an endless supply.
He's the guest of this house but the host of this meeting.
We sit down.

"Rabbi," we say as we lean forward at the table,

“Rabbi, we know that you are teacher who comes from God.
After all, no one could do the miracles that you are doing
but for the presence of God.”
We’re feeling him out a bit here before the hard questions –
just to see what he has to say for himself.)

But Jesus pauses, looks up at us, and says, “I want to tell you something very important.
No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again, from above.”

No one, he said.
And the way that he said “no one” . . . it was like he meant not even us.

We put a hand to our chin, as you do,
when you want others to think that you are thinking.
But then, we remember that we should not be touching our faces
if we want to help prevent the spread the infectious diseases like COVID-19.

No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again, from above?
No one?

Is it possible that this Jesus, this teacher who seems to know everything,
doesn’t even know us?

We are the Serious.

We are the Pharisees.

We are the disciplined, the righteous.

We are God’s chosen, God’s beloved, God’s people.

We teach God’s commandments.

We live God’s commandments.

We take pride in our identity, our history, our bloodlines.

We went to prison, were even martyred, rather than recant our allegiance to God.

And look at all we do.

We put on a festival every year for the poor.

We help people rebuild after hurricanes and earthquakes.

No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again, from above, Jesus said,
But surely, he can’t be talking about us.

Maybe he doesn’t know where we come from, what we believe.

Has he heard us sing 606, 118 in the blue hymnals?

We are the few, the proud, the Mennonites.

And born again? Why?

We want to go forward, not backward.

We want to grow from where we are, not go back to where we’ve already been.

Yes, some people need a new beginning, but not us.

We’re already in.

And besides, those words are embarrassing.

Born again.

If we repeated *that*, what would people think?

Surely, Jesus, you jest, we think.

And so, to show we are in on the joke, we laughingly say,
“How can someone be born when they are old?
Surely they can’t enter their mother’s womb a second time to be born.”
That’s what we said, but what we meant was:
“Come on, Jesus, give us news we can use.
Tell us something we *can* do to see the kingdom of God.
Teach us something practical.”

But Jesus says, “Let me tell you something important.”
Yes, we’ve heard this before.
It’s as if everything Jesus says is important.
“No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and Spirit,” Jesus says.
“Flesh gives birth to flesh. Spirit gives birth to Spirit.”

Okay. He’s talking about baptism.
We get that.
John the Baptist taught that people had to be baptized as a sign of repentance.
But Jesus, we’re in already.
We’re well past that.
We already are a part of God’s family.

Flesh gives birth to flesh.
Spirit gives birth to Spirit.
Two births, he says, to enter the kingdom of God.
You know, Jesus may have the right message,
but he’s got the wrong audience.
We pick at the thumbnail we always pick when we the respectable get irritable.

Jesus tells us, “Don’t be shocked that I told you that you must be born again from above.
The wind blows wherever it pleases.
You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.
So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Someone is at the door.
Jesus gets up from his chair and says, “Knock, and the door shall be opened.”

We think about all that he’s said.
It disturbs us.
We’ve studied the scriptures.
We’ve interpreted their meaning.
And we have, with rigorous discipline,
held ourselves and our community to keep the commandments that God has given us.

The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.
The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous.
They are more precious than gold, they are sweeter than honey.
(Psalm 19:7-10).

But Jesus says that we can't regulate the Spirit's coming;
that we can't legislate the Spirit's presence.
The wind blows where it pleases, so it is with the Spirit.
If the Spirit is beyond us,
if it doesn't come from us,
if it isn't achievable by us,
then where does that leave us?
If no techniques, no rituals, no disciplines, no programs, no practices,
can give us Spirit,
how can anyone be born of the Spirit?

When Jesus returns to the table and sits down,
we surprise ourselves by blurting out our first honest question,
"How can this be?"

Jesus pauses, and then he looks up at us.
"You are Israel's teacher, and you don't understand these things?"
You call yourself a biblical people, yet this confuses you?
You are the disciplined, the righteous, the chosen, the beloved.
You teach God's commandments.
You try to live God's commandments.
And you still don't understand how this is possible?

"Listen to me. I'm telling you the truth.
We speak what we know,
we testify to what we have seen,
and you still don't accept it.
If I speak to you of earthly things and you don't believe them,
how will you possibly believe heavenly things?"

Then he tells us who he is,
and reminds us who we are.
"No one has gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man.
Just as Moses lifts up the snake in the desert,
so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Snakes in the desert. We know this story.
Our ancestors, our people, had been wandering in the wilderness for forty years.
They were tired of promises, promises, promises
without God's fulfillment of those promises.
They were hungry. They were thirsty.
And they grumbled against God and Moses.
They no longer trusted them.

Well, Numbers tells us that God sent out snakes.

Venomous snakes.

And we've been taught that it's no accident that God made the people face the snakes.

After all, the original murmurer against God was the snake, in the garden,
the snake that tempted Adam and Eve to believe that God wasn't telling them everything,
that God didn't have their best interests at heart,
that they could no longer trust God.

On behalf of our people, Moses prayed to God to forgive them and to take those snakes away.

God answered this prayer, but not in the way that Moses expected.

God told Moses to make a bronze snake and to attach it to a pole.

All those who were bitten would live, God said,
if they simply looked at that snake,
that snake on a stick.

You see, facing the snakes was not simply an exercise of God's judgment;
it was also necessary part of God's healing.

The very thing that they were afraid to face was the symbol of God's healing.
They had to look up.

For the symbol of their sin was also the symbol of their healing.

"Just as Moses lifts up the snake in the desert,
so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

They simply had to trust.

It wasn't their believing that healed them.

It wasn't their merit, their struggling, their techniques, their disciplines,
their works, their words, their gifts, that saved them.

It was God. And what God desires is trust.

The people had to look away from themselves,
and they had to look up and trust God for food, for water, for healing.

Look up and live.

Simple trust.

You can trust if you doubt.

You can trust if you're afraid.

You can trust if you feel unworthy.

At the table, we look up at Jesus.

And Jesus says,

For God so loved the world

that he gave his One-and-Only-Son

so that every single individual – whosoever --

believes in him,

will never be destroyed

but have even now

a deep and lasting life.
For God did not send his Son to condemn the world,
but to save the world through him.”

This is not a message of condemnation.
This is not a message about what you must do or not do.
This is not a message about how to change your life.
No, this is a message of how to change your birth --
your very nature, your identity, your origin.

Listen to call of the midwife:

Take your eyes off of yourselves and wherever else you flee for security, for salvation.
Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.
And run with perseverance the race marked out for you, fixing your eyes on Jesus,
the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

You are not called to be successful, powerful, respectable.
You are called to be faithful.

And so, look again, and again, and again to Jesus.
Jesus is the midwife to new life.
What is he saying to you?