

**The Reverend Maggie Nancarrow**

**March 5, 2023**

In the name of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit—Mother of us all.

Amen.

Good morning—my name is Maggie Nancarrow, and I am the rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Duluth. It is an honor to share a word with you today as a part of the ECMN Lenten preaching series.

The first thing I'm curious about, as we look at the story of Nicodemus, is this: How many of you out there had to memorize John 3:16 in Sunday School?

“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.”

It is a beautiful summary of our faith: God loves the world, and God chooses to become incarnate—to be born into the world, so that we might not disintegrate, but so that we may also be born anew.

And yet, this verse gets soundbited a lot—and not necessarily for the right reasons. Growing up in Tennessee, I remember being in a culture where this verse was used as a kind of benchmark for Christians of all types—less as a way of championing God's love for all humanity, and more as a way of establishing Christian dominance in the public sphere. There was a thinly veiled threat underneath that proclamation of God's love: that we had to show up and believe the right things, or else God might take it away. This verse could easily be turned into a tool for exclusion: Belief in Jesus Christ as God, and specifically, believing the right things about Jesus Christ and the faith he began, makes you saved so you can go to heaven—and all other beliefs make you die and go to hell.

But I don't think that using it that way is true to our faith at all. And, if you take a look at the conversation that produces it—I think that becomes clear.

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Nicodemus the Pharisee comes to Jesus in the night.

He is taking a great risk in going there, because the story immediately preceding this one is the cleansing of the temple. Jesus has really upset the religious authorities, and Nicodemus is *one of* those religious authorities. And yet, he is drawn to Jesus—perhaps Jesus’s acts of abundance and healing have woken up in him an old hole in his soul—something that he’s buried for a long time, and barely even remembered—but to see the power of a man so steeped in the presence of God—it reminds him that he wants *more* out of his life.

And when he gets there, protected by the night, he doesn’t really know what he planned to say, and so words fall out of his mouth before he can control them: “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.”

Now that’s a pretty weird way to start a conversation. Most Pharisees, when they approach Jesus in the Gospels, they ask a question—they don’t just word-vomit whatever they’re thinking.

Underneath that awkwardly delivered statement is a question—a question that Nicodemus can’t quite bring himself to ask, either because he’s afraid or he doesn’t know how—

“How do I get access to this presence of God? Because it feels like Glory, and when it’s there, suddenly I know who I really am.”

Lucky for Nicodemus, he may not know how to ask the question—but that is the question that Jesus answers.

He says, you must be born from above, born again of the spirit.

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There is a hunger in you, and it can only be answered by a rebirth. It comes not from talking about me, but believing *in* me, about letting yourself be changed by this kingdom of heaven, by this spirit, so thoroughly and so completely that it is as if you have been born a second time.

Nicodemus's response, rightfully so, and perhaps much like our response is—wait, what? Born again how exactly? Do you want me to crawl back into the womb?

Notice here that Jesus doesn't say no. He just repeats himself. He wants Nicodemus to have in his mind a very physical picture. He wants him to think of the very real pains and realities of childbirth. And, the author wants us to make the comparison, so that we might imagine the birth of the spirit as something akin to the danger and the helplessness of the birth of the flesh.

In using this analogy, Jesus is making two points:

first, that to be truly alive in him, we don't have a whole lot of control—when we are born we are not the primary actors in the event. Being born in the spirit is an act of submission to a process, not something we can do for ourselves.

Second, the God who gives us birth takes a great risk to deliver us from the spiritual womb—in Jesus's time childbirth was dangerous, vicious, and often killed mother and child alike. Though she does the work, she has little control over the experience. The baby comes when the baby wants and the body simply knows what to do.

The metaphor of childbirth is *embodied*, even if what's born of the flesh is flesh, and what's born of the spirit is spirit.

With such a metaphor as this one, it is no accident that the culmination of this conversation gets incarnational.

When Nicodemus comes to him and says ‘Surely you have the presence of God’, Jesus replies—yes, and so will you too, if you take a risk to be born again in the spirit. If you take a risk to believe that incarnation is possible. God testifies to God’s presence here, and it’s real, if only you open your eyes to see, and your ears to listen.

Being born of the spirit is learning to see how God is born into the world.

And that applies to us too.

Recognizing incarnation is how being born by the spirit begins for us.

We must learn to see the world this way: it doesn’t come to us naturally.

We are separated from that knowledge of the incarnate God, separated from the reality that God is in every thing, every one, and even within us.

I don’t know about you, but I have a hard time seeing all people as incarnate of God—especially the driver of that Ford F150 with Texas license plates that passed me on the right doing ninety.

But there are ways that God’s love does work on us, so that we become more aware of God’s presence in it. The observance of Lent, routinely every spring, is one such way of being shaped. The study of scripture, praying together, the careful study of the vast beauty and inner workings of creation, the attentive and deep work of maintaining a marriage, or raising children—these are the ways in which the spirit shapes us so that we may see God’s love fully at work among us.

The Christian life is a life-long commitment to being dragged painfully out of the comfortable womb and into God’s incredible, incarnated love and power. And the world is in desperate need of Christians who live this way: whose trust and belief

in the incarnation is so strong that we treat the rest of our world as a part of our God.

Throughout your Lenten practices this year, I wonder how you might notice new birth taking place in your life. What is being born in your spirit, and how is God calling you forward? How is God incarnated in your life, showing love alive around you, calling you away from what is dying and toward what lives eternal?

Amen.