

## **Again & Again: Perishing & Living**

*A sermon preached on John 3:14-21 on March 10, 2024,*

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### I.

One Wednesday night awhile back, my kids, along with some of their friends and teachers here were doing as they do – running in circles around Kelly Auditorium, playing and laughing – while I packed up my things to come home. Part of their delight that night had come in the form of a bag full of Easter goodies – candy and little toys and a bunny-ear-and-cotton-tail set that Annabelle promptly put on with a squeal. But part of it came as they played a rousing game of “guess my age.” “Guess how old I am, Liam?” Ms. Kim asked. 144! (Riotous laughter ensued.) “What about me, Annabelle?” 17! (It’s a fraught game, no matter how you slice it!)

The game continued as we walked to the car, Annabelle and I holding hands as we crossed the street. “How old are you, mommy?,” she asked. “Ugh,” I said loudly, “I’m 37! I’m getting old!” (Have I mentioned that this was five years ago?!) And bouncing across the street with those bunny ears and tail catching the warm breeze and the final rays of sunset, Annabelle said to me without skipping a beat: “No you’re not, mommy. You’re getting new!”

### II.

Age seems to be a hot topic right now, doesn’t it? Whether we like it or not, it seems that our country’s life together in 2024 will prompt a referendum on age and its effect on living. Regardless of who you vote for, both the candidates are what one might call *advanced*, and if we think all the words have been said by now about what their age means for their fitness to lead, *may I just remind you that it’s only March?* I have to wonder, though, if

perhaps in some way, we're all missing the point at least a little, and maybe instead of worrying about whether one is old or young, we instead ask of them – and, of course, ask of ourselves – are we getting old... or are we getting *new*?

Swept into the flow of such a question in John's gospel is Nicodemus. The Gospel of John is full of encounters with Jesus like these, where a one-on-one conversation with ordinary folks holds the possibility of transforming their lives. Nicodemus is no exception. He's a Pharisee, one of the established religious leaders who is widely respected, in part for his confidence about what he knows. He's the guy with all the education and little of the imagination, the one who hangs on to the lessons he learned in his formative years with little reason to question them as his life unfolds. Maybe he even irons his jeans. No one would expect someone like Nicodemus to be curious about something new, someone who is saying things he doesn't already know or understand. It's only under cover of darkness that he can slip out to find this one called Jesus to question and prod. Since today's text only offers us what Jesus says to Nicodemus, let me go back and read for us several verses about Nicodemus – this is John 3, verses 1-9.

“Rabbi, we know you're a teacher sent from God,” was Nicodemus' opening line, “for what you do would be impossible apart from God.” But surely he didn't expect Jesus's response: “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” *Born from above?*, he wonders. *As in, childbirth all over again? As a man and not a baby? But I've gotten older. I'm not the young man I once was! How can this happen?* You can practically hear in his questions his literalist mind trying to make sense of what had to feel nonsensical. It flew in the face of what he knew, and surely pushed the limits of what he could

conceive. And even as he struggled to comprehend Jesus's words, Jesus adds another layer of metaphor – “the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear it, but you do not know where it comes or goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus's feeble attempts to understand lie in the last words we hear from him: “how can this be?”

Jesus' response to Nicodemus's questions unfold in what Martin Luther called “the heart of the Bible” and “the gospel in miniature”... these words so familiar to us who have long practiced our Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> “For God loved the world (the cosmos) in such a way that God gave God's Son, so that everyone who believes in him -- or in other translations of the word *believe*, everyone who treasures, everyone who gives their heart over to Jesus without reservation, everyone who invests in Jesus with their love – won't perish, won't end, but rather to have life of the ages, life of new birth, life everlasting. *The Message* translation continues: “God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. Rather, God came to help, to put the world right again.”<sup>2</sup> This is how the light pierces the darkness, how Jesus makes all things new.

### III.

Though we don't know Nicodemus's age, I have to wonder if he is getting on up there in years. “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” is his question, hinting at the life stage he finds himself in. Perhaps he's an elder, one who's got nothing else left to prove, no stone he's yearning to overturn. He's ready to enjoy the perks of retirement and get the senior

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<sup>1</sup> As shared by the SALT Project, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-lent-4>

<sup>2</sup> John 3:17, *The Message*

discount at dinner and rest on his laurels and settle in for the last season. Except for the unexplained pull he feels to Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

We can sympathize, can't we? Perhaps in our younger years, we are struggling for our identity, setting our values and convictions against what we know to be true. Perhaps in the middle passage, we bump up against the throes of a midlife crisis, where purpose and meaning have dulled with the demands of adulting and we wonder what might be next. Perhaps in our senior years, we assume ourselves complete. *No new tricks for this old dog*, we might think, our convictions congealing and our beliefs battle-worn and immovable.

Fridays are my hospital visitation days, and I had the joy of a meaningful visit with one of our members just a couple of days ago. He's been in and out of the hospital more than ever over these past months, and is weary from it. We were talking about how he's readying himself to return home next week – what rhythms his new treatment will bring, how that will change the shape of his days – and he said to me with a laugh, “maybe when you're on this side of 90, you're just too old to do new things.”

Fridays are also my sermon-writing days, and with today's text fresh on my mind, I gently wondered aloud with him about a different framing. “Maybe there are some new things your body can't do anymore,” I began, “but there are all sorts of possibilities for your mind and your heart!” With a smile, the rough edges of his voice wizened with years and heartache and love above all else, he chuckled, “I guess you might be right.”

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<sup>3</sup> I love this imagination about Nicodemus' age from John Buchanan's wonderful sermon, <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2010/012410.html>

For opening ourselves to the possibility of being born again with Jesus doesn't mean that all our beliefs become fixed. That we act one way and think one way and vote one way and shop one way. Quite the opposite. For to Jesus, being born again – born anew, in the posture of a baby – is to remember our reliance on God to live, and to live like babies who are vulnerable and dependent, whose needs are rather simple: nourishment, rest, relief, and love above all else, whose wonder is pronounced. Being born again asks us to have faith in God's transforming love for the world revealed in Jesus, a love that is higher and deeper and longer and broader than anything we might imagine<sup>4</sup> – and let our faith in this kind of love take root right at the center, in the words of Diana Butler Bass, as “evidence and the location finder of the way.”<sup>5</sup> Being born again means we welcome new winds of the Spirit to blow into every corner and crevice of our living. Being born again means we are no longer perishing, but alive with life of the ages. Again and again and again.

#### IV.

This week, I was invited by my friend and church member, John Carter, professor in the Divinity School at Wake Forest, to join in a panel discussion about the impact that theologian Frank Tupper had on our lives.

As I prepared for the class, I found myself remembering this beloved mentor of mine. I remembered it was four years ago this week – on the brink of the pandemic – that we gathered to mourn his passing and give thanks for his life. There, I heard his daughter Michelle share a beautiful story she'd read to her two young children, aching without words in the absence of their

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<sup>4</sup> This is the framework on John 3:16 from my granddad, William E. Hull, in his book, *Love in Four Dimensions*, p101.

<sup>5</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Finding Jesus*, p201.

grandpa: a children's book called *Waterbugs and Dragonflies*. Hear now the story:

*Down below the surface of a quiet pond lived a little colony of water bugs. They were a happy colony, living far away from the sun. For many months they were very busy, scurrying over the soft mud on the bottom of the pond. They did notice that every once in awhile one of their colony seemed to lose interest in going about. Clinging to the stem of a pond lily it gradually moved out of sight and was seen no more.*

*"Look!" said one of the water bugs to another. "One of our colony is climbing up the lily stalk. Where do you think she is going?" Up, up, up it slowly went....Even as they watched, the water bug disappeared from sight. Its friends waited and waited but it didn't return...*

*"That's funny!" said one water bug to another. "Wasn't she happy here?" asked a second... "Where do you suppose she went?" wondered a third. No one had an answer. They were greatly puzzled. Finally one of the water bugs, a leader in the colony, gathered its friends together. "I have an idea". The next one of us who climbs up the lily stalk must promise to come back and tell us where he or she went and why." "We promise", they said solemnly.*

*One spring day, not long after, the very water bug who had suggested the plan found himself climbing up the lily stalk. Up, up, up, he went. Before he knew what was happening, he had broken through the surface of the water and fallen onto the broad, green lily pad above.*

*When he awoke, he looked about with surprise. He couldn't believe what he saw. A startling change had come to his old body. His movement revealed four silver wings and a long tail. Even as he struggled, he felt an impulse to move his wings...The warmth of the sun soon dried the moisture from the new body. He*

*moved his wings again and suddenly found himself up above the water. He had become a dragonfly!!*

*Swooping and dipping in great curves, he flew through the air. He felt exhilarated in the new atmosphere. By and by the new dragonfly lighted happily on a lily pad to rest. Then it was that he chanced to look below to the bottom of the pond. Why, he was right above his old friends, the water bugs!*

*There they were scurrying around, just as he had been doing some time before. The dragonfly remembered the promise: "The next one of us who climbs up the lily stalk will come back and tell where he or she went and why." Without thinking, the dragonfly darted down. Suddenly he hit the surface of the water and bounced away. Now that he was a dragonfly, he could no longer go into the water...*

*"I can't return!" he said in dismay. "At least, I tried. But I can't keep my promise. Even if I could go back, not one of the water bugs would know me in my new body. I guess I'll just have to wait until they become dragonflies too. Then they'll understand what has happened to me, and where I went." And the dragonfly winged off happily into its wonderful new world of sun and air.....<sup>6</sup>*

## V.

*How can this be?, we wonder alongside Nicodemus, threatened by new life and terrified to shed what we've known. No matter our age, again and again, we go to Jesus to ask for a tune-up. "Just tweak a few things here, Jesus," we say, "and maybe a few minor adjustments over there. How about a fresh coat of paint on top of my daily habits, or a reorganized bin of my emotions?" Yet again and again, Jesus insists on new life. Trading cosmetic upgrades for a wholly renovated heart. Swapping a dogmatic set of beliefs for a transformed life. Exchanging resuscitation for rebirth, perishing for living,*

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<sup>6</sup> Doris Stickney, *Water Bugs and Dragonflies*

getting old with becoming new. Perhaps with the sound of dragonfly wings fluttering in our ears, we can hear Jesus' invitation most clearly: *For God so loved the cosmos that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes and loves and treasures him might not end when this body perishes, but rise to newness of life that never, ever ends.*

Did Nicodemus get it? Scripture doesn't tell us. But what we do know is that some three years later, on the day Jesus' wondrous love for this world pressed him to the cross, two men came to Pontius Pilate and asked to take care of the body of Jesus. They anointed him with oil, cleaned up his wounds, and gently placed their Lord in the darkness of a tomb. Joseph of Arimathea was one, and Nicodemus was the other, in the words of one writer, "born anew, born again, because this time it was daylight, and he was alive as he never had been before."<sup>7</sup>

Amen!

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<sup>7</sup> John Buchanan, "Appointment After Dark."