

Sermon for Sunday, March 5, 2023
Second Sunday in Lent
“Begin Again”
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Decorah, Iowa

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

How do we begin again?

I think that’s what Nicodemus is asking Jesus. I think it’s what Jesus is inviting Nicodemus, his community, and all of us to do. Begin again. In all sorts of ways, not just in our religious or spiritual lives.

The conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus has taken on layers of doctrinal interpretation over the years. How is one born again? Which denominations understand that correctly? How does baptism play into it? Do you have to make a decision for Jesus? I personally find those questions interesting. Or maybe I tell myself I do to justify the time and money I spent at seminary! But I don’t think they get us to the heart of what Jesus is inviting us to do. Jesus isn’t just talking about our religious lives. Jesus is pointing us to ongoing new life, rebirth, transformation for every aspect of our lives, at every age and stage of life. How can this be Nicodemus asks?

How do we begin again?

This is a question Abraham and Sarah must ask as well when God calls them to leave home late in life and enter uncertain terrain.

How do we begin again?

In the wake of Covid, in a polarized country, as a congregation figuring out how to be church in this time?

How do we begin again after a loss, when we fail, in the wake of conflict, in retirement, as a student, when plans always feel tentative these days?

How do we begin again each day when we face pain, injury, or illness; as our bodies age; while depression and anxiety lurk; when the sun isn’t shining; when we’re lonely? How do we get out of bed every morning?

These are hard questions to face with others in the light of day. I wonder if that’s why Nicodemus went to Jesus under the protective cover of darkness. It’s hard to ask and even harder to really stay with these questions. It’s tempting to rush to answers, strategies and busyness. Our culture offers many quick fixes for our questions, most of which cost money: this new diet, that subscription service, new shelves to organize the chaos, supplements, apps, rituals, and ointments.

I use many of these things. Yet I wonder if they keep us satisfied with self-improvement rather than renewal and transformation? I wonder, how do we live with hope that we can begin again, can experience rebirth at every stage of our life? Jesus points Nicodemus and us to the Spirit -

the Spirit that can't be controlled and managed, the Spirit that blows where it will. Jesus promises that new life happens as it did in the beginning of creation. It happens because God's Spirit is on the loose. The Spirit that stirred over the waters then still lives and moves beyond anything we can ask or imagine. Transformation happens for you, for me, for creation not because we have the best answers or the right strategies, but because of God who so loves the world, God who so loves you.

God says to us each new day, in so many ways, I love you, I am with you always, you are mine, you are forgiven, I am holding your life, I'm working in you to bless the world. You don't have to be on the treadmill of self-improvement. You can trust me and follow me into uncertain terrain, you have all that you need. God conveys this love and assurance to us through scripture, music, other people, water, bird song, trees, bread, wine, sunrise and dusk, every single day.

We can be born again each day because of God's love for us. I first learned this the first week of my first year as a Luther College student at a student-led Bible study. The "ice breaker" that night involved sharing the date that you were born again. I panicked. Had I ever been born again? One guy said a date in 1971, the day he was baptized. But I had no idea exactly when I was baptized. Then the woman next to me said, "Yesterday". That surprised me as I'd seen her leading worship earlier and she'd looked so full of joy and peace. "Yesterday," she said, and the day before and the day before and the day before. Each new day I'm born again as I remember what God has done for me." When it was my turn I said, me too. I think of her still, especially on days when it's hard to get out of bed.

We can and do experience rebirth each day. Yet there are also times when we're held in a protective, dark space for a time until the fuller new life that God is preparing in us is ready to emerge. Lent is one of those times. And interestingly, Lent is a period of 40 days. Whenever you see 40 in scripture, you know it's an important amount of time: whether it's 40 days and nights of rain in the time of Noah, the 40 years God's people spent wandering in the wilderness after slavery, or Jesus' 40 days in the desert. 40 weeks is also the length of a typical human pregnancy.

In these 40 days of Lent, we're held in God's womb as we await rebirth and resurrection at Easter. During the seasons of Lent and Easter we return to the waters of baptism, the waters of life and renewal, and we are reborn.

How do we begin again?

Through the love and life given by our Mothering God.

Through the Spirit that is on the loose.

Through water and the Word at work in creation and for you.