

God's Labor Pains

A while ago, my kids explored the evangelical side of things, with Tea joining her best friend at King's Cathedral and Joey going to New Hope with his best buddy.

Funny how they both say they won't be going back.

For Tea, the King's Cathedral folks seem to put God in a very small box, because for them, the world is only 4000 years old, dinosaurs roamed the earth with people, Adam and Eve are historical figures and unless you are one of them, you are on a train heading straight to hell.

At New Hope, Joey learned that the life of faith must be walked on the straight and narrow, and any deviation, like playing video games or other activities the church deems unfit, is to stray from God.

Tea came home realizing that God is far beyond the little box of human imagination, that God can just as easily create through evolution as through any other means, and that God's love is not for the few, but for the whole world.

Joey recognized how our lives are filled with failure, and yet, God is there with us, when we are faithful and when we aren't, when we are wise and when we're stupid; and yes, even when we play video games: that failure is often the most valuable teacher, that God loves us even, and perhaps most especially, in our brokenness....

Pretty good insights for two brain damaged teenagers, don't you think?

Perhaps Nicodemus is facing a similar dilemma when he turns off the Tonight Show and heads out of his home in the dead of night to meet Jesus.

Like some of today's Christians, he has a pretty small view of God.

Salvation is limited to the few, the rule followers, the elect....

So a God who's determined to save the whole world, who isn't bound by rules but is instead wild, unpredictable, free well that God can make your head hurt!

It's one thing to be convinced that salvation is reserved for those who look, talk, and behave like me: it's an entirely different thing to open my eyes to the God who's on the hunt for everyone, especially the strange and the weird.

And yet that's exactly how God is.

He picks the Jewish people not because they are deserving — but because they are nobodies.

In the eyes of the world, they're losers.

And yet in the time of Nicodemus, many of these same people are convinced that they are God's darlings precisely because they **are deserving**.

Jesus is having none of that!

He reminds Nicodemus that God saves not because we are good, but because God is good.

He reminds Nicodemus that every last person is a beloved child of God; that God wants all of us, not just some of us.

We know that God stops at nothing to have us because God becomes nothing **for** us — on the bloody wood of the cross — so that when we exclude the “nobodies” God says - “you exclude me, who became a nobody so that everybody can come home.”

Which, as far as Nicodemus is concerned, is pure gibberish....as Jesus adds insult to injury by talking about grown men being reborn, about the Spirit of God who's as unpredictable as the wind.

Jesus invites Nicodemus to see through a different set of eyes.

In the late 1970's I worked in a psychiatric hospital as part of my training to become a priest.

I learned that infants who are isolated from human touch have a much greater chance of developing schizophrenia than children who are routinely held.

This need to be held, to be touched, a need that continues throughout our lives, is an example of how connected we are with one another, how, as the old poem goes, no man is an island, how we influence each other as much as we need each other.

We might go even further and notice how our own perception of who we are, how we define ourselves, so much of this depends on how others see us, or more precisely, on how we **believe** others see us....

There are children who see themselves as stupid or brilliant — because that's how they believe their parents see them.

That's what happened last week in the Garden of Eden...

"All the trees are beautiful, until our parents see one tree through the envious eyes of the snake and seeing the tree of good and evil through the snake's eyes, they become envious like the snake, they see reality like the snake, they do what the snake suggests -- because they now see the way the snake sees things.

Before this, they see everything through God's eyes, where everything is beautiful, and sacred...." James Allison (paraphrased).

It's there in this week's first reading too, except Abram sees himself through God's eyes, and in faith, leaves behind everything, in search of the undiscovered but promised new country.

How do you see **yourself**?

If you sit with that for awhile, and consider all the people who have been important in your life, perhaps you will come to see that how you define yourself is closely tied up with how all those other people, both the living and the dead, have defined you.

Which brings us back to poor, befuddled Nicodemus.

He sees himself through the eyes of upper class Judaism, where rules and customs and norms are in charge, and he loves the safety of that life, it feels like a womb because it's safe and secure....

But Jesus pushes him out of that womb and down the birth canal, where he may encounter the sometimes blinding light which will let Nicodemus see the world through God's eyes.

This is the new birth awaiting everyone who claims Jesus as Lord, a new birth that also helps us get a better look at who and what God is....

We so often think of God as that old white man with a flowing beard, taking note of every mess up you or I commit.

But Jesus says God is not at all like that.

Jesus says God is like a woman in labor; laboring to give birth to us: human beings who are struggling to emerge into that which we were always intended to become.

This idea of God giving birth to us isn't new with Jesus, it's all over the Bible; it's just that when we get all dressed up in our Sunday best, many folks would rather hear about the rules rather than risk getting soaked in the after-birth of the Holy Spirit.

So how might all of this impact our thinking, when we think about our faith?

"We can start with the Hebrew word for womb; a word which also means 'compassion.'

Perhaps that is some of what surprises Jesus about Nicodemus -- that he fails to grasp that God is even now birthing all of humanity from a place of compassion!

There is another Hebrew word for 'pain in childbearing' -- it gets translated into English as 'grieve.'

Which is what God does when our first parents leave the garden, having decided they are equipped to know the difference between good and evil -- it's what God does when we put faith in the almighty dollar and military power -- rather than in the steadfast love of God.

God grieves God labors for us....." Debbie Blue, *Sensual Orthodoxy*, 35-6, paraphrased.

So maybe what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is that unless we are willing to be turned inside out; unless we'll throw caution to the wind and slide down the slippery hill of God's boundless desire to have us all, unless we throw in our lot with the God "who gives life to the dead, who calls into existence the things that do not exist," Rom. 4:17, and look for God in the healing, troublemaking, smiling face of Jesus, then we too, like Nicodemus, might just miss out..... on all the fun!

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