

*Behold the Mystery*  
John 3:1-17  
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*John 3:1-17*

*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.*

My dad took up scuba diving at age 75. He's on a dive right now and sent me a photo of an adorable, colorful fish amidst the swaying coral and I said, "Now that's one creative God!" Scuba diving has opened up a whole new world for him. He is like a child, exploring the universe for the first time. There was a lot he had to learn to take on this new hobby. It is dangerous and risky- scuba divers need to learn how deep to go and how much oxygen is there to sustain one's life. What he knew as a boater was the water from above, how it looked from behind the steering wheel and dashboard, the tides, the depth reading registry, other boats or whales which to avoid.

The perspective of seeing what is beneath the water has brought new life to him, as he understands the world in a new way. Looking out on the horizon, he sees more than what is visibly seen because of his experience of going deeper, of being under the water, and viewing all the amazing life that exists there. Millions of types of coral, sea creatures, fish, mammals. Editor of Presbyterian Outlook magazine, Jill Duffield, says, "We need to leave what we know to see the new thing God will show."

Nicodemus ventures out into the darkness in our Gospel reading today. A highly respected religious leader, he puts his social status at risk to meet with this rogue Rabbi, Jesus. "We know you are from God, because of all the signs you have done," Nicodemus tells Jesus, the signs likely referring to Jesus' miracle of changing water into wine and perhaps some miraculous healings not yet mentioned in the book of John.

In the movie, *The Horse Whisperer*, Annie, a prominent magazine editor from New York City drives her injured daughter, Grace, and their traumatized horse, Pilgrim, to Montana for treatment after a tragic accident. Finally arriving at the ranch of the horse trainer, Tom Booker, Annie says, "The ranch was so hard to find, there were no signs." Surrounded by lush, open fields and mountains and valleys as far as the eye can see, Tom replies, "Oh there's plenty of signs, just not in writing." City-dweller Annie doesn't understand.

Like Tom, the horse whisperer, Jesus challenges Nicodemus to look beyond the outward and obvious signs. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Probably not the response Nicodemus was hoping for. In some ways, Nicodemus is too smart for his own good. He takes Jesus literally, in a concrete and factual way.

"Uhhh...how can anyone be born after having grown old? Can you enter back into your mother's womb?" He is curious and wants to find out more, but can't seem to quite dive in fully. He's not ready, perhaps; like a diver who takes the class in the pool and acquires all the scuba gear, but can't take it to the next level into the deep seas.

We're like this so much of the time. The world is filled with Nicodemuses and Annies. It's self-preservation. We know what we know and are uncomfortable venturing out into the unknown. It feels unsafe.

Last month, the regularly scheduled meeting of Presbyterian pastors who gather in Napa, happened to be on one of the incredibly stormy days. One of the pastors, David Rodriguez from Ukiah Presbyterian Church, also a Navy Reserve Chaplain, was coming to the group for his last time before his deployment to Djibouti. Djibouti is a predominately Muslim country in the horn of Africa, bordered by Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, directly across the Red Sea from Yemen. David's job for the next 14 months will be to spiritually serve those in need by traveling to the most war-torn places in Africa and the Middle East.

It is not his first deployment; he has served in Iraq and Kuwait. But it takes its toll. This deployment was particularly difficult, and David was looking forward to meeting with the pastor group for extra support just weeks before leaving for Djibouti.

We awoke that morning to the warning sign that Highway 37, the route some of us take to Napa, was flooded. The leader of the group had the flu and emails flurried around that we should cancel the meeting. Everyone agreed except for David, who hadn't replied. Finally someone called him, and he was already on route, having a 2-hour commute from Ukiah to Napa. He pulled off on the side of the road to wait to hear if the group was meeting or not. He was already halfway there. Another military chaplain in the group said the meeting was on, that David was planning on it and whoever was able to please come.

I was torn. Though there were alternate routes to Napa, taking the Richmond Bridge through the East Bay, I was not familiar with these roads and didn't want to get stuck or lost. So I skipped the meeting.

Later that evening, David emailed the group, thanking those that had come so that he was able to share his issues about leaving and entering a war zone again, and have the prayers and support of the group prior to his departure.

When I received the email under clear skies, it struck me. I was concerned about the safety of the roads in the Bay Area and the possibility of being stranded. David was going to Djibouti. I was unwilling to go out into the storms of the unknown and risk my security at home. David was leaving his family and going to Djibouti. I waited for the rain to pass. David was going, rain or shine, to Djibouti. His courage, vulnerability and humility became more apparent than ever. He was walking straight into the fire. It reminded me of Jesus, who went straight into the battle zone because it was God's will for his life. He didn't avoid it for his own comfort. He went. He went right into the deep.

There is a story about an imagined conversation between twins in the womb, speculating about what happens after birth. One twin is convinced that birth is the end, the other says it is a new beginning. Both are correct. Life as they know it is coming to an end, while a new life is about to begin. Rebirth is the change in how we experience the world with the alignment of God's will for our lives. Rebirth is the ability to let go of what we know in order to be open to a new way of approaching the present moment. It requires vulnerability. It requires courage to go where we have not gone before. It requires a willingness to be changed. It requires stepping into the darkness with little more than faith.

Jesus tells Nicodemus, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and 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 isn't told explicitly what to do to be reborn because it is beyond his control. It is inexplicable; it is a gift from God. “The type of transformation or rebirth to which Jesus refers cannot be programmed or taught; it must be experienced. It's source and activity is mysterious and as unpredictable as the wind,” writes commentator Edwin Searcey. Jesus is asking Nicodemus, is asking us, who have Nicodemus tendencies, to accept our inability to understand it all and simply believe in this Spirit that brings new life. We hear the wind but we can't capture or control it. It blows where it chooses. Local author Anne Lamott says, “I do not understand the mystery of grace -- only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.” Jesus is asking us to behold this mystery.

The Greek words translated as “born from above” (γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν) in our passage are also translated “born again” and “born anew.” What does being born again look like for us today?

When we experience deep losses it may be difficult to trust again, and when we are grieving, it may seem like hope will never come. This is where we rely on the power of God. Like the wind that blows where it chooses, and though we do not know from where it comes, yet it exists. When we will allow ourselves to believe, when we will take the step to behold the mystery, we open ourselves to the possibilities God offers.

There is new life after becoming an empty nester, just as there is new life after become a parent. There is new life as a grandparent. There is new life as a widow, new life after surgery, divorce, cancer, becoming disabled. New life can be when we have to start over, to learn how to live again. God does this for us if we allow it. God is all about the renewal of life; about creating and recreating, offering hope when all seems lost. At the end of *The Horse Whisperer*, mother, daughter, and horse, once damaged, are all restored. They have experienced the true signs of God's grace and miraculous ability to heal.

For the believers in the Gospel writer's day, in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, the way of seeing and knowing Jesus Christ, who had so recently physically left them, was through the Eucharist. To take the Eucharist, the Lord's supper, communion, the body and blood of Christ, then and now, is to affirm belief in the ongoing renewal of the Spirit in our lives and our communities and our world.

The good news for us is that God does the messy and strenuous work that brings us to new life. God does the work. Just as God lifted Jesus from the grave, and we don't understand how, yet we behold the mystery. What new beginning is God urging you toward today? Can we put our trust in God, and through our sometimes doubting and uncertain faith say, “Yes, God, take me where you would have me go”? And

whether we find ourselves above the seas in a Navy ship or below the seas in scuba gear, or anywhere else on this earth, God is with us every moment. Let us trust in the power of God, lean not on our own understanding, and behold the mystery.