

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 22, 2009 B

John 3: 14-21

Claire Covington Bonner-Stewart was born shortly after midnight Thursday morning: seven pounds, eight ounces and twenty inches long. Mother and daughter are doing well. And dad sent pictures, which, I believe, all on our parish email list should have received.

The birth of Jeff and Ann's baby is a good starting point for reflection on the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, which is the context for today's gospel. If you notice in our worship leaflet, the gospel starts at verse fourteen and not at verse one, which describes how Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night. Perhaps his position as a prominent member of the community led him to seek out Jesus privately because he didn't want people to know of his interest in Jesus. For after all, he was a learned and devout leader in the temple. But he recognizes a spiritual power in Jesus that he hasn't seen elsewhere.

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus starts with Nicodemus saying to Jesus, "I see by your actions that God is with you." Jesus doesn't respond by saying, "That's exactly right, Nicodemus. God is with me - and as a matter of fact, if you don't accept me as your personal Lord and Savior, you're going to hell."

Instead, Jesus says, "No one can see God unless they are born from above." And it's here that Nicodemus asks the question which comes down through the centuries to our own time, as relevant today for all spiritual seekers as it was for him: "How can a person be born again?"

Nicodemus takes the words of Jesus literally because he asks further: "Can a person go back into their mother's womb and be born again?" We'll never know whether his question was possibly asked with a bit of sarcasm or not, but it did seem that Nicodemus was sincerely searching for "more" in his life and felt confident Jesus could lead and guide him.

Jesus, in effect, tells Nicodemus that God is the One who makes it possible for us to be reborn. We don't do it to and for ourselves and we can't make it happen for others. God makes it possible, but we need to be open to letting God's healing strength and love transform us. God's light can touch the deepest darkness of our souls, but it takes a willingness on our part to risk new possibilities for God's life to be born anew within us.

And that's not all. WE can become, often without knowing it, midwives of transformation for others on their spiritual journey. It's God who makes that happen, not us, for the wind blows where it will - and so does God's Spirit. We

never know how God's Spirit will touch us. I can't tell you how it might happen in your life anymore than you can tell me how it might happen in mine. What I can tell you is that if we genuinely open ourselves to the Spirit, we can experience rebirth.

My life as an Episcopal priest literally started one April Fool's Day, just before Holy Week. I remember that Good Friday, after the evening service, driving in the light of a full moon to a remote wooded area to meet a group of men who were gathering together for a unique spiritual experience. A friend of mine I met while serving as a hospice chaplain, had invited me to participate in a cleansing experience of death and rebirth. Jim was a Baptist minister. And he was also a native American with Cherokee roots. With the sound of drums and chanting in the distance, I made my way to the blazing campfire to join Jim and the other men, most of whom I didn't know, to have my first experience of a Sweat Lodge. Red-hot stones were placed inside a pit in the middle of a sacred space we could only enter by crawling on our hands and feet into the small opening where we gathered in the dim, lava-like light. In the darkness of that night - and while sweating profusely, Jim led us in prayers and chants and offered us the opportunity to speak in the womb-like setting. Whether it was letting go of burdens some were carrying in need of forgiveness for things past, or seeking healing and wholeness, I remember how physically and spiritually exhausting and exhilarating it was all at the same time. The sweat lodge is a symbol of the womb of Mother Earth - and the glowing hot stones in our midst symbolized the spirits of our ancestors. And, in the juxtaposition of being there right after a Good Friday service, where Jesus is placed in the tomb, the intricate relationship between death and birth, between womb and tomb, had new meaning for me. Both involve labor. And, whether it be the labor of a woman before childbirth, like Ann's this past week, or the labor of a person in the active dying process, like Michael Gross' father a week ago this past Friday night (which I witnessed with Michael and his mother), birth and rebirth involves labor. And sometimes, on our spiritual journey, we don't know if we're in the womb or in a tomb.

The people in the wilderness (in our first lesson) were grumbling, complaining about no food or water and played the blame and shame game. It was Moses' fault for leading them out of the familiar and predictable life they knew in Egypt - even though they lived in slavery. They thought they were dying and didn't know that the crisis they were experiencing symbolized by the poisonous snakes made them more vulnerable and dependent upon God. And so they turn to Moses who prays on their behalf - and God brings healing and hope and they experience new life.

Debbie Blue, in a reflection on today's gospel entitled "Laboring God" - a book interestingly enough Ann let me borrow recently, writes the following:

"It's incredible, really, that this extraordinary metaphor: 'to be born again,' could ever get so depleted that it's become equated with a one time, clean little, rational decision

somebody makes (or doesn't make) in altar calls, or church camps, or wherever. I mean, c'mon. We're talking about birthing and being born..."

"This story about being born again has often been reduced to a requirement we must fulfill lest we be eternally damned. That's distorted. I think in this story, Jesus is trying to say – it's part of God's labor for us, with us, that God became human and lived and died on the cross, and through this process which involves God's suffering, humiliation and pain, humanity is born again. And he invites us to believe in this. It's the labor process. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God brings life to the world. God births children." (Sensual Orthodoxy, Debbie Blue, Cathedral Hill Press)

What I've discovered in my own continuing 'birthing process' is something the Word of God presents for our reflection this Lenten Sunday: God sees the potential within us we have no clue exists. God is ready and willing to surprise us through all the growing pains through which we labor on our life's journey.

Two questions, which come to mind for me, and which I offer you both personally and as a parish family in this season of conversion and change, are:

1. Do we trust the strength of God's Spirit within us, moving us beyond our past?
2. And, are we willing to risk new possibilities for God's life to be born anew within us?

Amen.

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