

March 12, 2017 2nd Sunday in Lent
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Genesis 12:1-4a, Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ, grace and peace. Amen.

Birth—it is a tricky thing to talk about.

As we prepared to be parents, more than once—maybe in a foster parent training or an adoption class, maybe from a friend, perhaps in a book—I remember advice that went something like this:

Begin to tell them their story—their birth story—as soon as you can.

Now this advice holds however families come to be together, however they are configured, though it's particularly talked about in adoption circles.

The advice was even more specific, like tell them the story 'over the crib' and then keep telling the story. Let it expand with them developmentally.

The beauty for parents is that you can practice telling the story, finding the words, getting the tears out, when the child is young and not really understanding, and over the years the words flow more easily.

But like I said, this can all be tricky, sensitive.

Tricky to tell, for sometimes we don't know the whole story, or very much at all.

Tricky, for sometimes a child joins a family when they are far too big for a crib.

Tricky, because sometimes these stories are filled with tremendous joy, and often with great pain, loss.

Tricky because they are laden with meaning—the hopes and griefs that preceded this particular child, the choices, the not-knowing, the wondering, the array of emotions, the empty spaces in our lives that might not be as we wish them to be.

Tricky because young or not so young, we all yearn to know these stories at the core of our identity.

Talking about birth can be tricky.

That exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus, the one in our gospel today, also is tricky.

In the cover of night, threading his way between his strict, law-abiding community of the Pharisees....

And his own growing trust in this one he calls Rabbi who does these signs that just must be of God, Nicodemus and Jesus talk about birth, about rebirth—and, oh, it's tricky.

Tricky because Jesus seems to answer questions with more questions, thank you!

Tricky because Jesus, like a good parent of a teenager or young adult, is more interested in helping Nicodemus peel back layer after layer of experience.

Tricky because heard with the ears of our culture and our time, these passages have often been used in less than helpful ways—a litmus test, of sorts, “Are you born again?”

And a lot of us don't have a moment or story of being born again, reborn.

Some reject the concept all together.

Others shake their heads: that wasn't how it was for them.

I just tell the stories I've been told of my baptism, knowing well that's not really what some want to hear.

But still, it's true:

We are born, reborn, born again, and then born yet again into the truth of our baptismal identity.

I'd even go so far as to say that at her death last month, just shy of 100 years, Chiye Teragawa was born again into those watery promises of God's love, God's care and keeping, born into eternity.

Our Lenten theme is Confessing what blocks our way to God, and today, this second Sunday of Lent, we focus on control and how our need for control so often blocks the road to God.

Oh, Nicodemus, oh dearly beloved, we'd think the more we understand, the more tightly we hang on, the more closely we scrutinize, then, then we'd be closer to God.

And time and again, God shows us otherwise.

God's love is so extravagant, so unearned, so graceful, thankfully, so surprising.

Being born, and then born again, and again, it's a process, a God-process not entirely in our control.

Letting go opens us to experience birth and rebirth.

I have a ragged, well used, book given to me as a high school graduation present by Margo Martens, a friend and then-music minister in the congregation where I grew up.

In the cover of Henri Nouwen's 1972 classic *With Open Hands*, filled with vivid, visceral black and white photography direct from the 1970s, she penned:

"Sometimes I'm unable to form the words of prayers—and this book give me ways of expressing my pleas."

Over the years I've read the book, but more often, honestly, I've looked at the pictures.

My favorites are photos of people with open hands.

So often in our attempts to control something, anything, we grow clenched, tight, grasping.

These photos witness to our need to open our hands, to release, to be found again by God.

Even that simple prayer posture of open hands, can take us a new direction—try that for Lent!

Instead of tight, rigid, hands, balled in a fist, try taking a deep breath, rolling your shoulders back, and letting your hands rest open before you—see how that feels for a season, and what God can do.

Years ago our family began a Sabbath practice.

We try as much as possible to let Fridays be our Sabbath day: a good long walk, some rest, some reading, a nice meal, unplugged as much as possible, and there is time, space, breathing space.

The truth is, I work especially hard on Thursdays so I can savor Fridays.

At first I thought I just needed to get as much done ahead of time so I wouldn't be working on Fridays.

After some years, I realized that I just might be missing the point, for, really, we never get enough done.

Sabbath is about trusting that the world will keep spinning even when I don't get something done, even when I unclench my fists and hold my hands up to God.

In this season, I confess that this struggle to control is mine, and it's ours, it's human.

A couple of months back as our community discerned becoming a Sanctuary congregation, we had so many questions.

We wanted to know how it would work, why it was needed, and what would happen next.

Our decision—even with questions unanswered—to resist unjust immigration policies, was an act of faith, an act—as a community of Christ—of letting go of some of our control—often control born out of our place and privilege—and opening ourselves to be born again in this experience with our neighbors.

Today in Genesis we heard God's powerful words to Abram, words of letting go, trusting:

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you...and you will be a blessing."

I love this passage, the profound sense of trust that Abram, and surely Sarai, held.

And their witness of letting go of control, following God into ventures of which they couldn't see the ending, down paths that were yet unknown... and what a blessing they became.

Nicodemus' story and his honest questions about birth and rebirth give way to that much-beloved and oh-so-famous passage from John 3:16, For God so love the world.

Did you notice the verse right after that, verse 17?

It is especially poignant in this time: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world (the cosmos) might be saved through him."

As our Jewish and Muslim kin are experiencing acts of hatred and violence, as the Native Nations marched this weekend in DC, as ICE raids continue, God is not about condemnation, or judgement.

God is birthing a new creation, and birth can be tricky, it is often messy, and I'm watching for the beauty.

Let us find ways to experience, share the story of this birthing process—as complex and as tricky as it is.

and when the words fail, let us simply open our hands in trust that God's great love is uncontrolled, so audacious, so surprising, so grace-filled: Love for you, love for me, love for the whole cosmos. Amen.