



The UN-certainty of God – TouchPoint for May 26, 2021

John 3:1-18 (MSG) ¹⁻² There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren’t in on it.” ³ Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to

God’s kingdom.”

⁴ “How can anyone,” said Nicodemus, “be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?” ⁵⁻⁶ Jesus said, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit. ⁷⁻⁸ “So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak.

You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.” ⁹ Nicodemus asked, “What do you mean by this? How does this happen?” ¹⁰⁻¹² Jesus said, “You’re a respected teacher of Israel and you don’t know these basics? Listen carefully. I’m speaking sober truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don’t believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can’t see, the things of God?

¹³⁻¹⁵ “No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life. ¹⁶⁻¹⁷ “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.”

I like Nicodemus. He knows. He is not some wishy washy... hem and hawing... milquetoast man of faith. He knows. HE KNOWS!!!

He is certain. He is sure... He doesn't believe. He knows. He knows things about Jesus. He is sure about things concerning Jesus. He is certain about things in regards to Jesus.

And then he meets Jesus.

Oh well, it was fun while it lasted.

Nicodemus starts out this passage being certain: “Rabbi, we know...” But then gets so twisted around and turned inside out he doesn't know which way is up or how to be born from above.

Which is maybe the whole point of this passage. To move us from certainty to life. Life is not about certainty. And certainty is not God, no matter what our fundamentalist friends may suggest. You know, there is a word for people who can't have their minds changed, whose world view is forever fixed and cannot be changed.

The word is 'dead'.

The purpose of life is not to figure it out. And God is not one we can nail down. You would think Good Friday and Easter Sunday would have taught us that.

Let's not make the mistake with this text of trying to move from one certainty to another. That is just moving from the frying pan into the fire. No, the move is from certainty to mystery. That is why the analogies are birth and wind.

Now, while you can be certain you were born. You were never certain you would be born. Life is a gift. It comes out of nowhere and thrusts you into it. It happens to you and you find yourself in the middle of it. Kind of like the wind. You neither know where it is coming from or where it is going, but you find yourself in the middle of it.

And yet we try to turn it into certainty. Nail it down. Turn it into a formula. Which either means we have made a mockery of Jesus' analogy or Jesus is really bad at analogies. I mean really bad. As in making analogies that mean exactly the opposite of the example given.

Seriously, I googled being born again and I saw a bunch of listings for “Steps to being born again.” I want you to think about that... “Steps to being born again.”

Do you see how much we want to be in control? Do you see how much we want to be in charge?

The analogy is “BIRTH!!!!”. And while your parents may have taken a step or two to cause your birth, probably more of a cha-cha than a two-step, but who knows...

You didn't take any steps to be born. So how can you take steps to be born again?

Either we are interpreting the analogy wrong or Jesus is really bad at them.

Google “How to be born again” and you will get long list of steps. Google 'How to be born’ and you will get nothing, zip, crickets.

Birth is a mystery to the one being born. In the old, “subject-verb-object” sentence structure of life... There is nothing we are less the subject... and nothing we are more the object... than birth. WE DON'T BIRTH OURSELVES!!!

But it isn't just birth that is a mystery, what we are born into is a mystery as well. To be birthed means to be pushed into a new world, a strange world, a foreign world. Life is a mystery. It unfolds.

And to be birthed into the world of God is the greatest mystery of all. To be born from God and to be born into God is to be born from mystery and into mystery. At best, according to John, the most we can be certain of is that to be born from God and into God means to be born from love and into love, because God is love... which might just be the greatest mystery of all.

Love is not certainty. Ask anyone who has ever fallen in love. Ask anyone who has ever fallen out of love. Talk to people who have been married for many years and they will tell you they keep learning new things about their spouse, uncovering new depths in the journey of life. Talk to anyone who has been divorced and they will tell you of their bafflement at the ways of love... in all its joy and pain.

No, love is not certainty. It is mystery.

So, to be born from love and into love is to be born into mystery... an unfolding mystery... that involves me and you and the world. "For God so loved the world..." our passage for today reads. "For God so loved the world..." Not just you and me. The world. The whole wide world.

This ever changing, ever new, ever unfolding world. To be born into the mystery of love for this world is to be born into something new. To see the world as the object of God's love, rather than as a place of the other...and those people... is to be birthed anew. To be born into the mystery of love for this world is to be born into self-giving. And that is not about certainty or knowing, it is about living. But unfortunately, as a seminary professor I had once said, "Most people would rather be right than alive."

And now, I am reminded of the story of John the Baptist's followers going to Jesus and saying, "John wants to know if you are the one. Or should we keep looking – should we keep searching?"

Now Jesus does not reply with a 'yes' or 'no'. He simply says, "Tell John what you have seen. The blind see and the lame walk." It is a curious response. John wants to know if he can stop looking, stop his searching journey. Jesus instead responds with those who are now freed to see, to begin looking, not stop looking. "The blind see." Jesus responds with those who can now walk a new journey, not stop their journey. "The lame walk."

John the Baptist wants certainty, a cessation of sorts. Jesus births people into a new way of living, to an unfolding mystery to be experienced... rather than figured out.

This coming Sunday is Trinity Sunday in many churches. It is the one Sunday in the church year where the pastor gets to explain the doctrine of the Trinity in a 15-20 minute sermon.

Yeah, Good luck with that!!! That's why I've avoided the whole subject today.

I don't know... maybe it's just me... but the older I get the less I know and the mystery of life gets bigger. But that is not a negative. There is great peace in the words of our opening song "Be still and know that I am God."

Look, I'm sorry if this is not making any sense, if it's confusing. It is for me too. You see, I turn into Nicodemus when I meet the Christ. My world gets turned upside down and inside out. My certainty becomes confusion.

Going and selling all I have and giving it to the poor is not certainty. Turning the other cheek is not

certainty. Loving my enemies and forgiving 7 times 70 is not certainty.

All these things leave me open and vulnerable, subject to pain and hurt and being taken advantage of.

All of these things leave me vulnerable to life... and love.

Is this what it means to be born from above, to be born of the spirit. Does it mean to be vulnerable to life and love? The crucifixion would certainly imply that.

Is this what Genesis 2 is trying to tell us when it says we became alive when God breathed Spirit into us. All of us are born of Spirit, all of us live in the mystery of life and love. This is the mystery in which we all live and move and have our being... the God in whom we all live and move and have our being.

The one who, in the night in which he was betrayed took bread and wine and gave himself... poured himself out into others in a great act of love. The one who surrounded the deniers and betrayers in the mystery of his grace, so they would be birthed anew in the days ahead.

That is the spirit we are born from and into... in this meal. The mysterious spirit of love and grace. This is the mystery we encounter at this table, and it is done to us and in us.

Look, I'm pretty sure you are all confused at this point. I have been all over the place with this text and I'm sure you're asking, "What's the point, Jim?" "Just give me the point in one sentence."

I'm sorry, I can't. I don't know the point...It's a mystery to me...And to you...

Like the wind. Like birth. Like life and love.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Song

Be Still

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

Calm Me Lord

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.

Still me Lord, keep me from harm.

Let all the tumult within me cease.

Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Come Drink of Living Water

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Come drink of living water. Never thirst again.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Monastery Choir of St. John of San Francisco)

Benediction

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

(John Rutter, St. Paul's Cathedral Choir)

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you. To shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you. And give you peace....