

“Being Born Again”

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Text: John 3:1-17

In addition to this Sunday being the Second Sunday of Lent, today is also International Women’s Day, when we celebrate the gifts of women in the church. And so, Victoria and I designed the service so that the hymns, liturgy, prayers, and the music come from women. We invited women instrumentalists to come.

But I have to admit, it’s a little bittersweet this Sunday. Two competent women just dropped out of the presidential race. And no matter what your political leanings might be, whether you’re a Republican or a Democrat, no matter what you might have thought about Amy Klobuchar or Elizabeth Warren’s policies, I think most of us can acknowledge that it was difficult to watch women drop out. I would certainly like to see a woman president in my lifetime, and we just put off the possibility another four years.

It often seems like we make a couple of steps forward, and then we are pushed back again. It’s not just politics. It is in the workplace, where it is difficult to find women CEOs or board members. It is in medical care for women, where women are not trusted to make basic decisions over their body. Women of color often die of basic diseases in our country, because the doctor doesn’t believe them when they tell their symptoms.¹ (When it happens to Serena Williams, then you know there is a problem.²) It is in the global education of women. It is in the ability for women to be able to tell their stories of rape or sexual harassment and be believed. We think we’re making progress and then we get knocked down again.

In the realm of religion, the liberating work of women is taking place in every aspect of the church. In evangelical circles, women are trying to find a voice. Rachel Held Evans, one of my close friends who died right before I came here, often wrote about women, challenging evangelicals to think about biblical womanhood more broadly.³

In denominational churches, like ours, we deal with the “stained glass ceiling.” Search committees of the largest churches still look for a man. On average, a woman in her 40s gets paid \$10,000 less than a man does.⁴ Many ordained women do not receive health coverage,

¹ <https://www.propublica.org/article/severe-complications-for-women-during-childbirth-are-skyrocketing-and-could-often-be-prevented>

² <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/1/11/16879984/serena-williams-childbirth-scare-black-women>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/03/podcasts/the-daily/rachel-held-evans.html>

⁴ <http://www.pensions.org/file/our-role-and-purpose/the-connectional-church/living-by-the-gospel/Documents/pln-619.pdf/>

and they become chaplains so that they can get a decent salary. It shocks seminaries, because they know that their best students are often women. In 1956, women were first ordained as Ministers of Word and Sacrament in our denomination. Now 64 years later, we are still trying to crack that ceiling. One of my professors told me that when women started to be ordained, everyone assumed that the large liberal churches would be the ones that would be on the forefront of calling women and that it would be difficult to get small rural congregations to hire women. But it happened the other way around. Many churches are not like this one, where we have three women leading worship. There are still churches that won't consider calling a woman to preach in their pulpit.

The difficult thing, I believe, is that we get a very narrow view of God when we only listen to men talk about God.

Our scripture passage this morning reminds us of this. Nicodemus goes to Jesus in the dark of the night and asks what he must do to be saved. And Jesus responds that **he must be born again**. We must be born of the Spirit.

Julian of Norwich understood this truth. Julian was a medieval mystic and she is known now as writing the earliest surviving book in the English language written by a woman. She wrote the *Revelations of Divine Love*. Julian's voice is incredibly important to listen to as we move into Lent.

But for many years, her voice was silenced in the church. It was a group of cloistered women who made sure that her words were transcribed from generation to generation.

When Julian was alive in the Middle Ages, people would ask, "How are we saved?" and the answer was very different. There was the "satisfaction theory" of atonement. The idea was that God has a certain honor to protect. And when God's people do not obey God, then it is like a servant not obeying his master. There must be a punishment. So, Jesus took on that punishment in the crucifixion. And through Jesus' death, the cosmic debt has been redeemed, payment has been made, and we are saved.

Now this line of thinking causes all kinds of problems for the modern person. Because we do not think in terms of servants and masters. And we're wondering, *why does there need to be a death to pay for a sin? And who is the payment being paid to? Is the payment being paid to God? So why does God need the death of God's child in order to make sure some sort of cosmic account is being paid? For God's wrath to be satiated?* Feminist theologians cringed with all of this because it felt like some sort of divine child abuse, like God needed the death of God's son in order to restore honor.

But then feminist theologians began to dig deeper into the voice of Julian, who was there all along, her words were just being cloistered.

Julian explained that there was no wrath of God. God does not need anger to be satiated. *We* are angry and we make God in our image. Furthermore, she explains the suffering of Christ on the cross as birthing pains. And she explained that “Our Savior is our true Mother in whom we are endlessly born and our of whom we shall never come.” She likens God’s love for us not as payment for a debt. Rather, Christianity is new life, which comes from God giving birth to us. We are constantly being born anew. We are new creations. As Jesus said, “We must be born again.”

And suddenly the suffering that Jesus went through takes on a whole new perspective! It is no longer some cosmic transaction that has taken place, a payment for God’s fragile ego. But it becomes new life. The understanding that no matter where you are, you can start again. No matter what horrible things you have done in the past, God is a fierce mother, who will suffer the pains of hell on your behalf. To make sure that you have new life.

When we hear of Jesus bearing our sins on the cross, we can begin to imagine a parent, who longs to bear the pain of our children. As a mom or a dad, we know what that is like—we long to take on that pain because we love our child so much.

It is a scientific fact that when we imagine a violent and angry God, then we become violent and angry people. And I worry that if our theology remains stuck in this rut of betrayal, honor, and vengeance, that could continue to have devastating effects on our global impact.

And yet, if we listen to the voices of women, shaping theology and speaking from our pulpits, we can hear something different. We can begin to hear a theology that is not centered on death, but on birth. We can begin to hear a belief that is based on parental love rather than bruised honor. And perhaps, we can get closer to the words of Jesus. “We must be born again.”

To the glory of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Nurturer. Amen.