

**Rev. Adrienne Meier**  
**May 30, 2021, Holy Trinity Sunday, Year B**  
**St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana**

### **The Risks God Takes**

#### **John 3:1-17 NRSV, emended**

*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, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."*

*Nicodemus said to Jesus, "How can anyone be born again 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 Jesus, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "Very truly, I tell you that 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 (and the others) about earthly things and none of you believes, how can you people believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who has 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 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."*

We have spent more than a year meditating on the idea of risk. Did we risk going out for walk, when we'd been told to stay home? Would wearing a mask help? Gloves? A face shield? Where could we safely go? A restaurant? A park? School? Church? We might go one way and watch our neighbor go another. Sometimes we were probably right. Sometimes we were even right and still got sick. Sometimes we were right and it still hurt. And sometimes, we got it wrong - horribly wrong. We are, we hope, in the fading days of COVID. We see on the horizon a day where how we feel even now will be a part of our past, but no longer our present. But risk - that will still be with us. To live is to risk. To live is to risk being hurt. To live is to risk being lonely. To live is to risk encountering despair. To live is to risk losing it all. But it is who we are. We were created to live, and

risk is just what comes with it. In this way, we mirror our creator, our God, who takes incredible risks in order to bear creation into being and to love us until we are born again into eternal life.

In the darkness of night, the Pharisee Nicodemus comes to Jesus for clarity. There is an irony that he comes to see at a time when all is shades of grey, but, as we know, the deep mystery of night often unlocks in us truths we did not know were hidden there. John identifies Nicodemus as a leader of Judeans. Clearly, Nicodemus knows his stuff. He comes with credentials. He has reached the pinnacle of achievement in his day. And Jesus begins to speak to him by telling him, "The way to understand what I am doing, and the kin-dom that I am bringing into the world, is to be born again." Hear Jesus' statement again. We're so used to it that we jump to the many, layered meanings of being born again without hearing it as Nicodemus did. Jesus says that to understand that kin-dom of God - and remember, he says this to someone who achieved greatness, who knows many things, who is himself probably a parent, maybe even a grandparent — Jesus says to Nicodemus that the way to understand the kin-dom of God is to become like a helpless, ignorant infant. To understand the kin-dom of God is to undergo the messiness and risk of labor in order to be born into a new understanding. Jesus is drawing a metaphor to some very undesirable people and things: children, women, and childbirth.

In Jesus's time, children and women were of little account, especially to someone like Nicodemus. And childbirth, with its messy bodily fluids, was declared unclean by nearly all religions' standards. But this is the metaphor Jesus choose. It isn't a tidy metaphor. It is a metaphor filled with risks. Many women in Jesus's day would loose their lives in childbirth. Many infants in Jesus's day would not live past the age of two. Why would Jesus say that this is what the kin-dom of God is like?

Before we leave this image, I want to remind us that in the United States, we have the highest maternal mortality rate of any so-called developed country. The risk is highest among people of color. The highest risk is among those who will labor to bring their children into a world that too often makes clear it does not want them. To labor and bear a child in this country is to accept a series of risks that, in my opinion, are untenable. Why would Jesus say that this is what the kin-dom of God is like?

And, beloved, more and more people wish to bear a child into this world, but cannot. Or the family they've dreamed of cannot become a reality. To live in our day and age where children are celebrated, and where we often lift up a single image of a family as sheer perfect - to live in this world is for many people to wear their heart on their sleeve and to have it broken again and again because of a dream they have and cannot obtain. Why would Jesus say this is what the kin-dom of God is like?

And, beloved, before we leave this image, I want us to remember that every child born is somebody's child. I want us to remember that every child born is *our* child. The heartbreak of mothers whose children die publicly, horrifically, is our heartbreak. The risk

of bearing children into a world of war, and air strikes, and mass shootings, and racial violence - this is *our* risk. Why would Jesus say this is what the kin-dom of God is like?

And, before we leave this image, I want to just remind us that Jesus doesn't just say this is what the kin-dom of God is like, Jesus says this is what God is like. In John 3:16, it reads, "For God loved the world this way: that God gave the..." and this word here reads something like "only born." We normally translate it only begotten or just only, but the root of the word - *genē* - is the same as the word for born in verse 3. God loves the world so much that God, too, risks laboring, bearing, and being born into this world. And look where that risk will get him. Nailed to a cross.

God risks everything for us and for the sake of the world. That is what God is like, and so that is what the kin-dom of God is like, and so that is what we are like. This is Trinity Sunday, the day we've set aside to wonder what God is like. And this is something we know about God: God takes risks for us.

And, so, beloved, I guess what I'm getting to is this. You've had a crash-course in risk. We have thought about risk both individually and collectively in this past year. What are you going to take from this time? What are you going to integrate into yourself? What has happened that will now help you turn to your neighbor and set them free, because that is what the gospel is all about? We will never be able to change the fact that to live is to risk, but we can choose to risk our lives and livelihoods for the sake of our neighbor. We can choose to stand and say not one more. No more needless death. No more heartbreak. We can choose to stand and say I will concern myself more with the safety of my neighbor than with my own well-being because that is what God does and that is what I am called to do.

This isn't a popular stance, beloved, and I know that I am saying this in the hearing of children. And, as a parent, I don't want my children to hear this. I want them to know that they are safe, and that they can grow and thrive and be something amazing. But I also want to speak the truth. To live is to risk, the question is not will there be risk or won't there? The question is will I let the presence of risk blind me to the needs of others, or will I bear the risk of others in this world in order that they may be saved and set free? Because, beloved, that is what we, by the grace of God and by our baptism in the name of the Triune God, that is what we have been called to do, because that is what God does for us.

Amen.