

May 27, Trinity Sunday (John 3:1-17)

John 3:16 is about crisis, but not the crisis of God brooding in heaven waiting on us to make a choice.

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [May 9, 2018](#) issue

The South of my youth, a “Christ-haunted” place, to borrow a Flannery O’Connor phrase, was fascinated by the third chapter of John. Not so much with the character of Nicodemus or the full story of his nocturnal visit to Jesus, but with the sound bites pried loose from the narrative. Long before it was cool to shake a purple wig and a John 3:16 sign for the TV cameras at the World Series, southern Christians had plucked the cashews out of the nut dish of this narrative and held aloft Jesus’ pronouncements, codified in the majestic King James cadence: “Ye must be born again” and “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” These two sayings became empty vessels into which could be poured a full measure of sweaty, crisis-driven, blood-saturated, revivalistic theology.

John 3 is about crisis, all right, but it takes the whole Nicodemus story to recognize the shape of it. It is not the crisis of God brooding in heaven waiting on us to make a choice, withholding a verdict on our souls until we walk the sawdust trail. The crisis of John 3—what set a bewildered Nicodemus exclaiming, “How can this be?”—is Jesus himself, the flesh-and-blood embodied Jesus, so close to Nicodemus that he can feel his breath as he speaks of “earthly things,” of birth, water, and wind. Nicodemus thought he was the one who came to Jesus, only to discover that in the cosmic scheme of things, Jesus came to him and to all humanity. Jesus came in the flesh, sent by God—not to condemn, and certainly not to engage in polite theological discourse, but to save.

John says Jesus came because God loves the world, and not the lovable surface world of delightful music, literature, and art, the world of carefree laughter tinkling on the verandas of the privileged, but Nicodemus’s world. Though respectable on

the surface, it's still the underbelly world of night, the God-hating world of violence, torture, rebellion, and sin. Mysteriously, God loves this world. New Testament scholar John Meier observed that the standard English translations of John 3:16 obscure the "verbal and theological collision" captured in the Greek, which positions *God* right next to *world*, or *cosmos*—"for so loved God the world." The point is clear: improbably, shockingly, God loves the actual world, the God-despising world. God loves the world with such ferocity that God draws near to save, even to dwell among us in the flesh. "When God loves," says Meier, "things happen: great things, terrible things, incarnation and cross."

Former *Century* publisher John Buchanan wrote in these pages of a Sunday service at which he baptized a two-year-old child. He read the standard pronouncement from the prayer book: "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever." Unexpectedly, the child responded, "Uh-oh." Buchanan writes: "It was an appropriate response . . . a stunning theological affirmation." Likewise, Nicodemus's response to Jesus could be heard as a shocked "Uh-oh." Moving politely toward Jesus with an inquiry, Nicodemus alarmingly finds Jesus moving toward him to rescue him, to transform him, to save him.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus showing respect. But religions, writes Stanley Fish, "don't want your respect. They want . . . your soul." Jesus, knowing Nicodemus is drowning in the churning night sea, doesn't want his respect; he wants his soul, his whole person reborn. Uh-oh.

So there we are with Nicodemus, in the stormy sea, the light of the rescue helicopter shining in our face as we flail and bob in the swells. It would be foolish to pretend that we are simply out for a leisurely swim. The waves are too high and the wind is too strong. We cannot think our way to safety; we thought our way into danger. We cannot work our way up; we worked our way down. The bright searchlight of Jesus reveals two wonderful and terrible truths: we are in trouble and he has come to save us.

Not long ago, I spent some time as a guest in a lovely home high above a beautiful bay on South Africa's Western Cape. Looking at the charming villas on the hillside across the bay and the inviting beach hotel on the white sand below, I could have been on the French Riviera or at any other seaside resort, except that here, early on many Sundays, an indigenous African congregation makes its way from the nearby township to perform baptisms in the bay. As vacationers like me walk leisurely along

the beach and sit on balconies sipping mango juice, converts are plunged beneath the waves and come up reborn as children of the light. It is disconcerting, really, as if these baptisms reveal the superficiality of respectable life. I am curious about these people, coming up from the waters of new birth and opening their arms wide to their Savior. I would like to go down there, but like Nicodemus, I would probably go at night.

When all is said and done, Nicodemus finally becomes the mirror image of Judas. At the beginning, Judas is called into the light, but in the end, the betrayer slips into the night. At the beginning, Nicodemus comes by night, but he finally moves, however hesitantly, toward the light, the word become flesh. Somehow it is fitting, then, that the last glimpse we have of Nicodemus is not finding him in the company of scholars opining about spiritual truths but in the cemetery with a lavish amount of spice, caring tenderly and lovingly for the body of the Savior who came in the flesh to rescue him.