

An expectant dad's sympathy for Nicodemus

Nicodemus is perplexed. There's a lesson for us in his confusion.

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Maybe Nicodemus is on to something. When the fan-by-night of Jesus asks him how a person can be born a second time, Jesus doubles down on his insistence that a second birth is necessary to enter the kingdom of God. I wonder if Nicodemus's confusion is less an argument with Jesus on this point and more an acknowledgment. Each of us plays such an alarmingly small role in our first births that it is difficult to imagine how something that is not ours to do or initiate, but which is nevertheless essential to our being, comes to be.

In other words, maybe Nicodemus is wondering how a full-grown man crawls into the womb, but surely becoming smaller would not have given him any more of an ability to be born on his own command. After all, as my children regularly remind me, human babies are the least developed of all mammalian babies, the least in position to coordinate any action.

Maybe Nicodemus wrestles with the necessity of what can only come as gift. If this is the case, then Nicodemus's perplexity is itself a gift to us. History is replete with instances of human insistence on misconceiving God's gifts as commandments to perform. But none of us thought to be born or had any input in the matter. Faithfulness, with respect to birth, is not in the being born; faithfulness is thanking God for gifts we did not make ourselves, our selves not least among those gifts. Indeed, even the wherewithal with which we lift up our hearts is a gift of the living God.

The mystery is similar, I think, with the "command" to bear fruit, which Jesus speaks in the same Gospel in which we find Nicodemus. Here, the agency of the parent in the birthing metaphor is revealed to be only a slight step beyond the limited agency

of the child. Admittedly, this is not a purely hypothetical metaphor for me today; my wife and I are expecting the birth of our third child any day now. That last phrase expresses well the limits of our agency: *any day* does not suggest that Rebekah and I are free to pick whichever day we'd like, but rather that we do not pick the day.

It is no use commanding someone to be born. But that does not leave us unable to prepare for the day we will not pick (just as we, following our forebears, pray to be delivered from dying suddenly and unprepared). Of course there are the usual things people do preparing for birth: we bought a car seat, purged inessentials from the house to make some room, enlisted the help of friends and a doula, and made plans for abrupt, if temporary, leaves from our professional jobs. Also, there are unusual and mostly unseen-to-others things: Bek has come to rely on her daily Pilates routines. She's taken to sitting at the dinner table with her chair turned backwards and to exercising off of the couch in ways that leave her all but standing on her head.

I smile when I see her do these things because of the ways they reflect her embodied acceptance of a gift she does not control. I also smile because of the beautiful picture they are, I believe, for the life of the Christian who does not control the timing of God's gifts and whose life receives the invitation to be made ready by a standing of things as they are on their heads. Bearing fruit is not the same as producing on command. It is to abide in the love of the one we learn to trust, like John reclining on his Savior. Our hearts become open to those gifts we do not control. Our surrender becomes our thanksgiving.

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