



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

**Born again**  
**Lent 2, Year A**  
**Sunday, March 8, 2020**  
**The Rev. Amber Carswell**

It happened when I was in third grade in a church basement. I have no memory of what church it was, my family didn't attend any church, so surely it was some friend who invited me but I don't even remember who, I know I didn't go back though I really don't know why. But I remember the church basement, the dim orange light, the dank underground feeling of the air, the smell of the glue and paint from arts and crafts supplies set out for me and the other kids, the teacher an older woman with the same short, Aquanetted, tightly curled hairdo as my grandma. It happened that night: I memorized my first piece of scripture. 3 guesses for which one it was. John 3:16. I would much later come to understand that I had memorized the KJV, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." I got a prize for being the first to recite it completely. Thanks to this unknown church that I never returned to, three years later I would understand something about my favorite professional wrestler, the notorious Stone Cold Steve Austin, that I wouldn't have otherwise.

My family may not have been religious, but we had our rituals, and from the ages of 10-13 years old, I and my sisters and my stepdad gathered in front of the television on Monday nights to watch WWF wrestling. My mom hated it. Now, maybe most of you have never experienced the allure of professional wrestling, or maybe you have more pride than I do and would never publicly admit to this, but it's not hard to understand the appeal: imagine your favorite soap opera, just with fantastical violence in the story lines. You watch professional wrestling because of the story, the political intrigues and machinations and alliances, the sudden but inevitable betrayals, the over-the-top characters who rose and fell like epic heroes. The late 90s was its golden era.

Stone Cold Steve Austin was my favorite. Young, brash, beer-can-wielding up-and-comer who defeated one of the oldest and most revered names in wrestling — Jake the Snake, the old guy who, in the storyline, was touting himself as a born-again Christian. Stone Cold humiliated him in front of thousands of rabid fans. Afterward the match, Stone Cold rages to the camera that Jake the Snake goes around bible-thumping, quoting psalms, saying John 3:16 — well, Austin 3:16 says you just got whooped (with a little more colorful language.) My friends and I doodled Austin 3:16 designs on our Trapper Keepers. My sister dressed up as him for Halloween last year.

I hadn't considered how Austin 3:16 and John 3:16 went together in my mind and influenced one another before now. I've mentioned you that I entered evangelical conservative fundamentalist Christianity in my teens — and now I see some parallels between that world and the world of professional wrestling, John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son that whosoever should believeth in him shall not perish." Well, there you go. Logically, whoever doesn't believe in him shall perish. Part of what was intoxicating about this new Christian world view was that there were very clean lines between who was in and who was out. Who was on your side (which was God's side) and who was the enemy. That was a huge draw of the WWF. There was also drama — like conversion, the penitent weeping in the prayer circle. But in wrestling, there's also a movement called 'turning heel' when a good guy turns into a bad guy, and that happened in church, too — a backslider, the one who went back to the parties, back to the unsaved girlfriend, back to secular music, maybe back to the Episcopalians, god forbid.

But when you enter an Episcopal church, you don't get just John 3:16 read to you. And when that verse stops existing in isolation, it stops fitting so well into the professional wrestling schematic. A man named Nicodemus approaches Jesus. Nicodemus has heard some things about this rabbi, and he wants to hear from Jesus himself. You're a teacher from God, he says, because you've done some amazing signs that are only possible with God's spirit. The text says Nicodemus comes by night, implying that he's metaphorically in the dark, that he doesn't really understand what's going on with Jesus. Jesus gives this poor, already confused man a truly confounding set of images in answer.

You have to be born again (or from above) in order to see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus says, "Okaaaaay. What?" Well, Jesus goes on, you have to be born of water and the spirit. Okay, so tell me about this spirit and how this will work. Well, Jesus says like some new age guru, imagine a wind that blows anywhere, wild and unpredictable. You can hear this wind but not see it, and it's not at all in your control. Alright. Still not really following, Jesus looks at Nicodemus like, "What wasn't clear? You're supposed to be a teacher of Israel." I suspect Nicodemus' problem, and mine, and maybe any one of you who find yourselves entering the text confused and then finding only deeper confusion, has something to do with the categories that we expect God to live in. Jesus rejects instinctual move. So often when we read the Bible, we take it up as a tool for perpetuating our own agenda rather than as a story to begin to live into, rather than it being something that actively dissolves our own agendas and self-interest.

This self-interest and sense of competition in everything plays out in far more than just fundamentalism and professional wrestling or even people who can memorize Bible verses the fastest. We've been told that people's selfish, darwinian, evolutionary, competitive instincts are the best way to describe human behavior, and we've believed it and internalized it. As though altruism never actually exists, or that any institution could have actually meant to embody grace more than consolidate its own power. We've believed this, that the overriding question to govern the future of our children is best understood as to how they'll benefit some future economy, and we have believed that creating beauty or poetry or contemplation, that dedication to wisdom, courage, generosity, personal dignity might be cliché at best, valueless next to the supposedly all-consuming drive to perpetuate one's own self-interest. Someone suggested to me this week, with perfect kindness and innocence, that priests shouldn't visit the sick so much, what with a possible pandemic on our hands. But I wonder what the world would look like if a whole bunch of people suddenly decided self-preservation wasn't their foremost concern. My name will be forgotten in a hundred years, whether or not I die of COVID 19. But taking the name Christian means that we believe deeper things live on — that what you have done in obedience to love is gathered into those arms stretched out upon the cross, that you become a part of that perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

So maybe we could re-orient. It seems that Jesus is asking Nicodemus and you and me to dismantle some things—like the idea that we know at all what the spirit of God is up to or what it intends any more than we can describe the wind. To see this way might be like being born again, with new eyes, a new outlook. I mean, rebirth — what a rich metaphor, even though it's a tainted now since you were told that it's this momentary instant that you decided to become a Christian. I don't know any birth that looks like that. Birth, creation, happens because of an abundance of love between people, there's gestation and formation for a long time, after which you go through a brutal process of entering the world through a birth canal, at terrible and dangerous cost to the woman bearing you, to breathe air for the first time. If I imagine myself born again, surely I have to hold onto the fact that it's other peoples' love and desire and selflessness and pain that makes me who I am. It strikes me that I had very little to do with my birth at all, and how terribly intimate the whole process is.

John 3:17 says that the Son didn't come to judge the world — we have it as "condemn" but it is the same Greek word that is translated everywhere else in John as "judge." It's a different feel, isn't it, to say the Son didn't come to judge the world, to make distinctions of who is in and who is out, who's on God's side or the enemy's side, whether you were clever or strong enough to win, whether you turned heel — all of those are different riffs on the same broken story. God came to undergo the dangerous, intimate process of giving birth to the real you. And it was because God so loved the world. Amen.