

Empty Enough to Believe
Lent 2A, John 3.1-17
March 5, 2023
The Rev. Scott Walters

First a little product placement. This sermon intro is brought to you by Calvary's Friends of Music. Lots of you have probably seen the great lineup of preachers for our 100th Lenten Preaching Series. But I hope you've also seen that Kristin Lensch and the Friends of Music are sponsoring Memphis musicians under the age of 30 to play at LPS each Thursday.

This week we heard a Brazilian born cellist named Roberta dos Santos, a PhD student at the University of Memphis. Now, I'm a sucker for a cello, so if somebody just carries one into our chancel and sits down I get a little verklempt. But I tell you everybody in this room sat stunned as she played a strange and haunting and gorgeous piece by a composer named Caroline Shaw. Roberta scratched and plucked and bowed her instrument, and even vocalized tones from time to time. When she finished, I didn't want to exhale, lest it break the spell she'd cast.

I think a powerful encounter with art often does two things. First it stops us in our tracks as if we've never heard or seen or imagined anything quite like it. But it then returns us to the world we know with our senses awakened, looking for other traces of similar magic.

Here ends the highbrow portion of this sermon. Because this process of looking often means googling my way onto YouTube. In this case, I found a great conversation between a soulful cellist named Ben Sollee, and Andrew Bird, a violinist who also plucks and strums and chords and bows his instrument while he sings and even whistles occasionally. I know. It sounds awful but I do love me some Andrew Bird.

Well, near the end of the conversation, Andrew says, "Sometimes I wish an interviewer would just ask me what a song is about."

So Ben says, "Hey, Andrew. What's... um... 'Give it Away' about?"

And Andrew says, "You really want to know? Well, it's about hitting absolute zero. It's about playing so many shows that you think you've emptied yourself completely... There was this one particular show in Belgium where I felt like I was just completely empty. There was just nothing more. And a clarity came with that moment. I started laughing. I'd been in bad shape up till then. But I realized, 'Oh I'm empty. There's no more to lose.'"

You should know that Andrew Bird is a guy who always looks pretty empty. Like he's slept outside for a couple of nights on an uncomfortable bench. So being something of a connoisseur of emptiness, that night in Belgium he must have been pretty depleted indeed. But what's interesting is that emptiness felt like a starting place for him. Not the end of a dwindling path, but a beginning.

And, you know, I hope Nicodemus got to a place like that. Especially since he didn't have the option of googling "born from above" or "...of water and the Spirit" or any of the strange things Jesus told this curious Pharisee who came to him once under the cover of night. Because the process of following Jesus, or maybe even just the process of finding out who we truly are, may still require a kind of emptying. And Nicodemus seems to be as empty as Andrew Bird by the end of our gospel reading today.

It's odd, reading the entire section of John in which the most famous Bible verse of them all appears. It's odd because we usually hear John 3:16 as the clearest distillation of the gospel. But the scene is shrouded, dark, full of uncertainty and bewilderment. The scene is more of an

emptying of Nicodemus's beliefs and assumptions than an answer to his questions. Which means that John 3:16 was not delivered as a clear and obvious truth, but as part of an unsettling process that must have gone all the way down in this curious seeker.

Nicodemus was a devout believer, you see. A Pharisee. Which, as Micah Greenstein reminded us on Friday, does not make him a bad guy. Maybe some Pharisees took their religious fervor too far, like we religious folk of all shapes and stripes will at times. But, most basically, Pharisees believed that God's gift of Torah should shape the lives of all Jews in the ways it shaped the lives of priests. So the practice of his faith mattered deeply to Nicodemus. Maybe he came to Jesus under cover of night because so much of his identity could be at stake if this rabbi challenged some belief or practice he held dear.

So he comes. But the things Jesus says to Nicodemus don't make sense. How is one born again once he's grown old? It's a good question. The phrase "born again" may be a worn out cliché in our minds, but it shouldn't be. In fact, I suspect it's still meant to empty us of some of our worn out beliefs and assumptions as well.

Like this one. We may have been told that John 3:16 means a person is saved by her belief. Everyone who believes in Jesus will not perish. And there's a more troubling and explicit line that follows what we read today. Even though we hear in John 3.17 that God sent the Son into the world not to condemn it, but in order that the world be saved—the world, not a few of us—even though we hear that stated clearly, Jesus also says "Those who do not believe in him are condemned already." A smarter preacher wouldn't bring that line up, since the lectionary conveniently left it off. But, given the gospel of grace, what can it mean?

Well, a common Christian belief is that if you believe in Jesus, the mind of God will change about you. Believe, and *then* your sins will be forgiven. *Then* you'll be destined for heaven rather than a place where teeth are gnashing and worms never die. The problem with that reading is it makes belief a work, and a pretty impossible one, at that. Ok. So I don't have to offer those messy sacrifices. I just have to believe? That sounds like a good deal, until you consider how hard it is to will yourself to believe something that you don't. Go ahead. Try to change some deeply held belief. Try it now. I'll wait.

You can't, can you? Because most belief isn't chosen. It's something that happens to us just because we happen to be awake in the world. It's something that happens to us as experiences and evidence take on the shape of a truth in our minds. So isn't it a weird concept to get soul-saving credit just for believing something is true?

On the other hand, what we do believe colors everything. The world we experience is the world we believe in, whether it's the real world or not.

In junior high I believed that the most glorious creature I'd ever seen sat a few desks over in my civics class. But at the time, I was pretty sure she didn't know I existed. Or if she did, she probably knew me as that uncool kid in sad glasses. Of course, I had no access to the actual goings on in this girl's lovely head. So the world I experienced was the one I believed in: namely, that I was invisible, if not pathetic, to her.

Well, one day a friend delivered some impossible news. The girl had noticed me, and she actually liked me. And with this news I stepped immediately into another universe entirely. For so many lonely days, I had thought the world I inhabited was one in which I couldn't possibly be of interest to my would-be beloved. But I was wrong about her and about the world. Of course, when I did finally ask her out, we discovered that we didn't have anything to talk about, so my imagination had failed me again. But here's the true thing about all of us: the world we believe in is the world we experience to a very large extent, isn't it? We believe what we believe until something outside ourselves changes it, in spite of our will, as often as because of it.

In other words, maybe those who do not believe are condemned already, because to believe you're condemned is to experience life as a condemned person, whatever the divine judge's actual judgment might be. Even if I am redeemed, accepted, and forgiven along with the rest of the world as the gospel says, if I believe God is vengeful and angry with me, my universe will feel like it's governed by a vengeful and angry God. Couldn't that be the very belief Jesus was trying to empty Nicodemus and the rest of us of as well? The belief that God is condemning us rather than redeeming us?

700 years ago, a German mystic named Meister Eckhart said, "It is a lie—any talk of God that does not comfort you." I wonder, are there condemning lies about a vengeful God that you and I still carry, if not every day, then on our worst days? Are there visions of God we need to be emptied of if we are to enjoy the redeeming love of God Jesus preached and embodied?

Well, if we can't just will ourselves to change what we believe about God, what can we do? This is where I think Nicodemus becomes our hopeful and trustworthy guide. Because John 3:16 didn't resolve the mystery of God's redeeming love for Nicodemus. It didn't settle things instantly like a first century search engine result. The last words he speaks in the chapter are "How can this be?" He's still empty of understanding. But there is reason to believe that the emptying of Nicodemus was a beginning, not an end, because he stayed. He stayed with Jesus in spite of his confusion and disbelief.

This is only the second week of Lent, so I don't want us to get ahead of ourselves. But I think it's worth a mild spoiler to say that, while nearly every one of Jesus's friends will desert him in the end, Nicodemus will stay. When Jesus's body is emptied even of its life and the story seems empty of all its hope, Nicodemus will not be hiding in the shadows with the disciples. He will reappear with a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes to prepare the body of his friend for burial in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. He will stay, even when things get even more bewildering than that night when a rabbi named Jesus said this curious Pharisee must be born again from above.

Friends, we know that sheer willpower can't empty you of a deep-seated belief, even if that belief plagues you with fear and shame and judgment. But maybe you and I could, like Nicodemus, find the will simply to stay close—close to Jesus and close to each other—even and especially in the midst of our fears and confusions. And the first lie I hope we can be emptied of as we do, is that God is in the business of condemning this world. The lie that God is anything, in fact, anything at all other than saving, redeeming, even comforting Love.