

Look for the Helper

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, March 5, 2023, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [John 3:1-17](#) and [Psalm 121](#)

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I think most of you know that one of my heroes is Mister Rogers. During his lifetime, he said some deeply profound things in surprisingly simple ways. He helped preschoolers learn about their feelings and encouraged them along the process of discovering their own agency. And he helped parents learn to be good parents by giving timely and helpful advice. Of all the advice he gave to adults, the piece of advice for which I think he is currently most famous is advice that he learned from his mother. I'll let him explain it in his own words.

[Play video.](#)¹

I think Nicodemus was looking for some help, help that he thought he might get from Jesus. So he went to Jesus, perhaps, as John Shelby Spong put it, “against his better judgment.”² He came to Jesus at night. Does the gospel’s author include that detail to tell us the Nicodemus is in the dark? Or perhaps this detail is included simply to suggest that Nicodemus doesn’t want to get caught associating with Jesus? (A little something to think about; next week, we consider a story from John 4 that happens in the middle of the day.)

When Nicodemus comes to Jesus, “he acknowledges that Jesus must somehow be related to God, for only if God were working through [Jesus] could [Jesus] do the ‘signs’ that he did.”³ Now, remember we’re only at chapter three of John’s gospel, and the only “sign” that Jesus has performed that the gospel writer has mentioned is the one at the wedding feast in Cana when he transformed water into wine. That story is in chapter two.

Nonetheless, this one sign we know about (and perhaps others we don’t know about) are enough to convince Nicodemus that he can find whatever it is he’s looking for from Jesus. But did you notice that Nicodemus never says what he’s looking for, that he never asks Jesus a question? He acknowledges that Jesus is a rabbi (as is Nicodemus, so this is a conversation among equals), and Jesus immediately says, “No one can see the realm of God without being born from above.” It seems to me like a non-sequitur. I guess it wasn’t to Nicodemus – though he doesn’t understand what Jesus said.

The wordplay gets lost in translation. The Greek here is *anōthen*. “No one can see the realm of God without being born *anōthen*.” *Anōthen* can mean both *again* and *from above*, and Nicodemus hears Jesus saying “again,” rather than “from above.” That’s why Nicodemus thinks what Jesus is saying is preposterous. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” Nicodemus asks.

¹ https://youtu.be/-LGHtc_D328

² John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013), 86.

³ *Ibid.*

Jesus gets that Nicodemus doesn't get what Jesus is saying. Jesus tries again. "No one can enter the realm of God without being born of water and spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit." It's easy to hear this as some sort of reference, perhaps obscure, to baptism, and thus to "a decision to accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior," as Evangelical Christians would typically put it. Spong says that this is a misreading of the text. I agree with him.

"To be born of water is simply to be born into the life of this world, a process achieved in the breaking of the maternal waters. To be born of the spirit is to step into a new dimension of what it means to be human. John makes that abundantly clear in the next sentence when he has Jesus say: 'that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.' Then Jesus identifies the spirit with the mystery of the wind 'that blows where it will and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or where it goes' (John 3:8)."⁴

I understand scientifically that the wind is caused by the sun's uneven heating of the earth and by the earth's rotation. I understand that. Yet, when I stand in the wind, when I experience the wind, I don't think about that at all. When I'm not being busy and allow myself the truly notice the wind, I feel it. I experience it. It seems almost alive to me, not the simple result of scientifically explainable forces. It blows where it will, coming from wherever it comes from, going to wherever it's headed.

That happens to me when I immerse myself in just about any aspect of nature. When I give myself the space to not be busy and truly notice creation, when I allow myself to truly dwell in God's creation, I can be awed. Sometimes it's as simple as pausing where I am looking up at the hills. And sometimes when I do that, Psalm 121 comes to mind. "I will lift my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come?" And the hills remind me that my help comes from God.

My help doesn't come from Baal. My help does not come from my self-sufficiency. My help comes from Yahweh. That's what the Psalmist is saying. Yahweh, typically translated as "LORD" and printed with small capital letters, is our keeper.

We need help – all of us – from time to time. We may be resistant to admitting it. That doesn't change the fact that we need help. And both the Psalm and the passage from John remind us that our help comes from the LORD who made heaven and earth. The way John says it is in the often misunderstood verse John 3:16, and the often ignored verse that follows, John 3:17:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but 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 can blame King James and his Bible translators for the first problem. The word "so" in "God so loved ..." meant (back in the 17th century) "in this way" – as in "like so." In

⁴ *Ibid*, 90.

contemporary English is means “deeply” – as in “I’m so sad” or “She’s so smart.”⁵ So let’s retranslate the passage: “This is how God loved the world: that he ...”

Now, let’s talk about the word “world.” The Greek is *kosmos*, and it is often used as a shorthand for all that is estranged from God, that with exists in sin.⁶ You’d think the sentence about the *kosmos* would go something like, “This is how God hates all that is in sin (but loves that little remnant that is righteous): ...” And, instead, Jesus says, “This is how God *loves* everything, even that which is estranged from God’s own self: ...”

The sentence gets completed with another surprise. God loves the *kosmos* by sacrificing. God helps the *kosmos* by being lifted up like a bronze serpent (you can read about that story in Numbers 21). Like Abraham holding nothing back from God, not even his son Isaac, God holds nothing back from us – not even the Son – out of love.

Now, I’m not certain what it means to “believe” in that kind of Son or sacrifice. I have to interpret that through the following verse. “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Maybe believing in Jesus happens when we turn to God as our helper, and we are born from above yet again. Maybe a mom or dad can explain it better than I can. In her book, *Freeing Jesus*, Diana Butler Bass writes:

“John Philip Newell often shares the story of being overwhelmed by seeing his newborn grandson for the first time and how profoundly spiritual the experience was. Ancient Celtic Christians believed that infants came from God and that in gazing at a newborn’s face, we see the very image of God; and conversely, through the infant’s eyes, in some mysterious way, God beholds us. The birthing place is a sort of inner sanctum where we encounter the freshly born presence of God.

“No wonder Christian tradition makes much of the birth of Jesus, the one whose birthplace opens to angels, animals, shepherds, and shamans. It is more than the silent midnight holiness between Mary and her son; the whole cosmos witnesses the birth. More than an image fresh from heaven, the Infant is the very embodiment of the divine. Every birth is echoed in this birth – no wonder the stars fill the heavens, the light shines forth. The presence of God made manifest, the glory of the One from the womb of grace. Darkness of birth, light of the world.

“‘Very truly, I tell you,’ said Jesus, ‘no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’ (John 3:3)... I did not really understand Jesus’s words until my daughter was born, when the womb opened and water broke forth, and then, in the silence, the breath. Water and spirit. Cradling the image of God so close, the image staring back.”⁷

One final thought: if we have been made in the image of God, then when we are helpers, we are living into that God-image. When we make sacrifices out of love for others, we are living into that God-image. And that’s why Fred Rogers’ mother was right. When, in

⁵ “Gospel: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Lent 2,” <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/3/2/gospel-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-2> (posted 27 February 2023; accessed 1 March 2023).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2021), 225-226.

the midst of turmoil and crisis, we should look for the helpers. In doing so, we're looking for *the* Helper. We are looking for God.

Amen.