

The Process and the Event

John 3:1-17 (March 8, 2020)

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Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“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. ¹⁷“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.

Historical Context

This story is primarily addressed to persons living c. AD 90 who were flirting with joining the Johannine community, but were reluctant to come forward publicly and do so. The passage is preceded by the wedding at Cana, the story of Jesus driving out the moneychangers in the Temple, and the narrator’s comment that “many believed” because of “the signs that he was doing. Nicodemus comes “by night.” In the fourth gospel, trust in Jesus--the light of the world--comes through “seeing.” Nicodemus is not yet able to see. He is in the dark.

Theme: The Process and the Event

The moment of birth is the culmination of one long process, and the starting point of another long process. Why make the distinction? Because Jesus’s words in John 3 are at risk of being too closely associated with that single-point-in-time and missing the process of being born.

What does it change of our understanding of John 3 if we recast “you must be born again” into “you must allow the seeds of the Spirit to enter your soul, germinate there, grow there, until finally they come forth in an amazing and God-filled way, and your very nature and your relationship to all around you is changed forever”?

Being born culminates one process of germination and growth and transformation, and begins another.