

# Olly Olly Oxen Free

Laurie Haas

 John 3:1-17

We are wrapping up a series on *Starting Over*. Pastor Steve has walked us through some ideas on finding our purpose, imagining a better future and embracing the sacredness of life. Today through an encounter with Jesus and Nicodemus, we get to wonder about choosing a different life. We are going to hear the Scripture passage as it comes to us from the 3rd chapter of John, verses 1-17.

When is the last time you played hide and go seek? It's certainly been a few years for me. But you remember the classic game right? Where someone covers their eyes, counts to one hundred and then everyone else scrambles away to find the best hiding place. The counter-the person who's "it"-- is then on a quest to find all of the hidden players. After a certain amount of time, if "it" just can't find one or more of the players, she yells the phrase that means it's safe to come out of your hiding place, come on in-- wherever you are. It's a new game: "Olly, Olly Oxen, Free."

Now, you know this game is always way more fun when it's kind of dark. You can hide so much easier in the dark. And we like to hide, don't we?

When we meet Nicodemus, he is hiding in the dark. Now Nicodemus was a man of the law. That's what it meant to be a Pharisee. Not that he was a lawyer, but that his sole purpose was to serve God by a scrupulous observation of regulations governing every aspect of behavior, of thought, speech, diet, hygiene, relationships, work, leisure and worship. The Chosen People lived by Mosaic Law, but that wasn't good enough for the Pharisees. They sought God in ritual perfection.

Surprisingly, Nicodemus saw something of God in Jesus that he felt like he just had to check out himself. So Nicodemus goes to Jesus, yet he isn't willing to risk his reputation or his status by associating with Jesus

when anyone else could see. John makes it clear to us that this powerful Jew came to Jesus by night.

So from the shadows, Nicodemus approaches Jesus and then Jesus shines a light that gives him a new way of seeing things. To this man who has made his life's work: one who is seeking God, Jesus says, "No one can see the kingdom of God; no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from above" or born again. Well this completely befuddles old Nicodemus. Clearly a grown person cannot re-enter his mother's womb and be "born again." Nicodemus is obviously thinking in a very literal, physical way. Jesus tries to clear things up with a word picture that powerfully utilizes the double-meaning of the Greek word *pneuma* -- spirit, wind.

In verse 8 Jesus says, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

By connecting spirit to wind, it's as if Jesus says, you don't know where it comes from or where it goes, but you experience the wind. You experience it; you don't control it. Even if you can't comprehend re-birth of the spirit, from above -- come experience it, come and see! Come into the light...be born again.

I have to confess as I was reading this passage this week, that I had the same response as Nicodemus: "How can this be?" I want to see and enter the Kingdom of God; I want to be "born again." Don't you?

Now I know that to feel and experience the wind, you have to go outside. I recently discovered this wonder of the cool breeze on the new bike I got for Christmas. It's got a basket and everything—I kind of look like the Wicked Witch of the West, tooling along, except my bike & helmet are robin egg blue. Anyway, I wonder if John's use of Nicodemus in the darkness juxtaposed against Jesus, who is the light of the world might give us a clue about experiencing the Spirit.

So let's look at this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus again. Nicodemus literally means "conqueror of the people". Jesus told him that he needed to start his life over. As a conqueror of people,

## “Be real, share your story, be reborn into your authentic self.”

Nicodemus could function well in the Kingdom of the Pharisees and the Kingdom of the Roman and Jerusalem Politicians, but the Kingdom of God needed another kind of life orientation.

What a contrasting encounter it was! The Conqueror of nations and the Suffering servant, Son of God, the light of the world.

Power, prestige and privilege, in conversation with compassion, servanthood and service.

Perhaps it is embracing these Jesus traits that helps us to come out of the darkness and into the warmth of the light for a rebirth. And we can do this even if we hold a position of power, like a past president once did.

On July 3, 1988, an American navy ship thought it was under attack by an Iranian F-14. In response, the Navy gunned down an Iranian airliner containing 290 civilian passengers, killing them all. Polls revealed that most Americans were against paying compensation to the families of the Iranian victims; you know the hostage crisis was still fresh in many minds. In spite of this, President Reagan approved compensation.

After this decision, Reagan was asked by reporters if such payment would send the wrong signal. His response was, "I don't ever find compassion a bad precedent." Wise words from a powerful person. Revenge may be easier to practice, but compassion demonstrates the heart of God. Compassion takes us into the light.

It seems like compassion has been hollowed out a bit in culture as being a squishy kumbaya or an unrealistic expectation--that none of us can live up to. I wonder if it's time that we reclaimed compassion as Christ followers, as we try to come out of our dark hiding spots and into the light.

Krista Tippett spoke about compassion in a Ted Talk back in 2010. So what are the components of compassion? First, she says, compassion is kind. Kindness is an everyday byproduct of all the great virtues.

Compassion is also curious. This was a word we used in the Chaplaincy training, I just finished—you can show how much you care for someone when you are truly curious about them and what they have to say.

Compassion can be synonymous with empathy. It can be joined with the harder work of forgiveness and reconciliation, but it can also express itself in the simple act of presence. It's linked to practical virtues like generosity and hospitality and just being there, just showing up. She says that compassion also is often linked to beauty -- and by that she means a willingness to see beauty in the other, not just what it is about them that might need helping.

Krista goes on to say, for the religious, compassion also brings us into the territory of mystery -- encouraging us not just to see beauty, but perhaps also to look for the face of God in the moment of suffering, in the face of a stranger, in the face of the vibrant religious other.

Kindness, curiosity, empathy, forgiveness, reconciliation, presence, generosity, hospitality, showing up, beauty, mystery... showing up.

I think this practice of compassion puts us down wind of the Spirit, and that's a good thing. We are in the pathway, but I think we have to be careful to not wrap and tie up compassion with a neat little bow. Compassion is messy and sometimes complicated. And you know why? Because we are messy and complicated.

There is a story about a memorable track event at the Seattle, WA, Special Olympics some years ago—it later went viral on the internet. As the story is told, nine special needs youth all gathered at the starting line, anxiously awaiting the flag to begin their 100 yard dash. A few yards in, one young man stumbled to the ground. Face down and defeated, he lay on the track sobbing. It is reported that the other eight, hearing his sobs, all stopped in their tracks and returned to help him up. Upon raising him from the ground and wiping his tears, it's further reported that all nine then linked arms and jogged to the finish line together.

It's a beautiful story, isn't it? Only thing is, it's not true. At least not "all together" true.

Spectators at the 1976 Seattle Special Olympics recall that the race started as described, and one young man did indeed fall to the ground. At that point though, they recall, a "couple" of the other kids stopped, helped him to his feet, and joined him, crossing the finish line together.

It's a subtle difference, but a significant one. We want to liken our experience in the church to events like this. How we hear someone's cry for help and in a grand act of compassion, we all drop what we are doing, gather around and triumphantly carry him to the finish line together. But it's not realistic, is it?

It's not realistic to believe that every one of those special needs athletes were utterly selfless—much less even aware that the young man behind them had fallen—it is likewise unrealistic to expect that everyone in our church family is ready to be utterly selfless, putting the needs and encouragement of others above their own. Or to think that everyone in our church is even aware of our downfall or need.

This story speaks into two issues about our "rebirth." First, we are flawed humans who are trying to follow Christ. Even if we are trying to practice compassion each and every day—knowing that rebirth is an ongoing process, some days are just better than others. Sometimes our eyes and our hearts are in sync and we show up just at the right time to offer love and support. Sometimes our heads are down, too filled with our own concerns and worries to even notice that another person has fallen.

The other part of the problem that this story illustrates to me is that we are pretty good at hiding in the dark. We hide things like our shame, our insecurities, our perfectionism and our low self-esteem. Most people don't even know when we've fallen. Maybe this is because many of us believe Mark Twain when he wrote, "You should never tell people your problems because 80 percent of them won't care, and the other 20 percent will think you deserve them!"

Whatever the reason, we are afraid to show our brokenness or our flaws. We are afraid to ask for help. And to this too, I think Jesus says, "Come into the light." Be real, share your story, be reborn into your authentic self.

And do you know how we can find the courage to come out of our dark hiding places? We can hear what Jesus told Nicodemus in the most popular verse in the entire Bible. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but may have eternal life."

Luther called this verse "the gospel in a nutshell" as it signals God's profound love for us and indicates the depths to which God would go to convey that love—for all of us broken people. It is followed up by a powerful verse that we should tuck away in our hearts as well: "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." This is a gift: we can't earn it and we don't deserve it. Like the Spirit, we don't control it; we are recipients of it. Friends, in Jesus we are safe; we are saved. We can come out of our dark hiding places. All will be well.

Robert Fulghum wrote a sweet book, called *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. The neighborhood kids were playing a game of hide-and-seek and Fulghum began reflecting on his childhood. He writes, "Did you ever have a kid in your neighborhood who always hid so good, nobody could find him? We did. After a while we would give up on him and go off, leaving him to rot wherever he was. Sooner or later he would show up, all mad because we didn't keep looking for him. And we would get mad

back because he wasn't playing the game the way it was supposed to be played. There's hiding and there's finding, we'd say. And he'd say it was hide-and-seek, not hide-and-give-UP, and we'd all yell about who made the rules and who cared about who, anyway, and how we wouldn't play with him anymore if he didn't get it straight and who needed him anyhow, and things like that. Hide-and-seek-and-yell. No matter what though, the next time he would hide too good again. He's probably still hidden somewhere, for all I know.

Fulghum goes on to say, "A man I know found out last year he had terminal cancer. He was a doctor. And knew about dying, and he didn't want to make his family and friends suffer through that with him. So he kept his secret. And died. Everybody said how brave he was to bear his suffering in silence and not tell everybody. But privately his family and friends said how angry they were that he didn't need them, didn't trust their strength. And it hurt that he didn't say good-bye."

He hid too well. Getting found would have kept him in the game. Hide-and-seek, grown-up style. Wanting to hide. Needing to be sought. Confused about being found. "I don't want anyone to know." "What will people think?" "I don't want to bother anyone."

Olly-Olly-Oxen-Free. The kids out in the street are hollering the cry that says, "Come on in, wherever you are. It's a new game."

And for all of us who have hid too well, crouching in the darkness but longing for the light, it's a new game. It's a re-birth. Listen, I think I can hear Jesus calling, "Olly-Olly-Oxen-Free."



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Laurie Haas

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