

# The Bottom of the Pond

Isaiah 6; Romans 8; John 3

Sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's Episcopal Church on May 30, Trinity Sunday, 2021

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*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life.*

Indulge me a semi-psychedelic thought experiment: Imagine your soul in the form of a large pond in the middle of a country field. And then imagine yourself—in an out of body experience kind of way—standing on the shore of the pond, trying to take in the complexity of what lies before you.

What are the Lilly pads and dragonflies of your soul? What is floating on the surface of your imagination? Toward what does the wind blow your mind in all the idle, in-between moments of a day? What targeted ads are filling your Instagram feed? What's at the top of your to-do list? What rapidly approaching event is distracting you with worry? Take a moment and consider what's on the surface of your soul.

Now, let's move to the middle depth. What creatures swim around inside you? What are various identities that animate your life? You're a Texan. You're a mother. You're white. You're an alcoholic. You're a priest. You're a computer engineer. You're an artist. You're rich. Or you're poor. I wonder what lies in your middle depth.

Now the scary part. What's at the bottom of the pond? What is buried in the darkness? What is there inside you that nobody or almost nobody else knows? What passions lie down in the depths of your being? What addictions are growing so down deep that no one can see the evidence of their existence from the surface yet? And what treasure is down there? Treasure that maybe even you have forgotten about? What are the questions you have always been afraid to ask, the dreams you've always been too shy to share? When you take a long brave stare, what do you see at the bottom of the pond?

Now imagine your name is Nicodemus and you are a Pharisee of ancient Israel and you have an appointment to meet with Jesus. I wonder what was going through Nicodemus's head. We assume there are many books and many years of rabbinical training swimming in his middle depth. There are probably scholarly essays about the Torah floating on his surface. There is too at least a certain degree of public reputation for righteousness, proved by his presence leading regular public prayers and perhaps a few selfies taken at recent protests at the capital in his feed.

We're given only a few clues of what might lie deeper in the heart of Nicodemus in this moment. The first clue is that we're told Nicodemus is the one who made this one-on-one appointment. So he's the one with the agenda. He is carrying . . . something, we don't know what exactly—he needs to know something, ask something, confess something. The second is that he comes at night, which means he doesn't want other people to know about this meeting. So *it is* something down in the bottom of the pond then; something that might put his public reputation in jeopardy. And third, he tells Jesus he believes he has come from God. So, though he is obviously afraid, he is also obviously hopeful. This is a brave first step of faith. Nicodemus is here, in the

middle of the night, trudging something up from the depths of his soul to present it to, well, God, or the closest he can find to God at the moment. That's the scene set.

Jesus says this: "No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." *If you want what you have come for, you need to start over, and the way you need to start over is like a baby; you need to become utterly vulnerable, utterly dependent.* In one sense, what Jesus says sounds bizarre. But in another, this is exactly the invitation Nicodemus was been looking for. His heart must have been burning. And perhaps it caught him too soon and a little off guard. They have barely said hello and all of the sudden the moment of truth has arrived. How much of his his soul does he let Jesus see right here off the bat? Does he just come out and say that very thing he's come here to say, whatever it is?

Sadly, we never get to see what's at the bottom of the pond for Nicodemus. Instead, he does something that many of us religious leaders are quite good at—he puts up his vulnerability shield. He deflects a personal invitation by giving a professionalized, sanitized answer. He engages Jesus in absurd intellectual debate instead. And he never gets up the courage. Jesus tries again but once the vulnerability shield is up, it stays up. Nicodemus just stays on the surface of the pond. Jesus tries to assure him that he has nothing to fear. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life.* And Jesus continues with a long beautiful speech that lasts long after our reading for today ends, but Nicodemus never says another word. He just slinks back into the darkness of the night.

If it feels like I'm reading too much into the story of Nicodemus, it's because I'm reading it against the backdrop of what happens in the next chapter, in chapter 4, in the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. That story is a mirror image of the Nicodemus story. Everything Nicodemus has in his favor, the Samaritan woman has as a strike against her. Where Nicodemus is a well-respected, educated, male religious leader of the chosen people, she is a disreputable, impoverished woman of the chosen people's enemy, the Samaritans, and notice, she's not even given a name.

Interestingly, one of few narrative details included in this second story also has to do with the time of day. It's not night; we're told it's noon—a difference that turns out to symbolize their dramatically different interactions with Jesus. Because where Nicodemus goes to great lengths to control what parts of himself are revealed to the light of Christ, the Samaritan woman finds no shadows to retreat to. She discovers that Jesus already knows everything about her. She doesn't have a husband. She's had five. She couldn't hide even if she wanted to. But that's not the most important part of the story. As terrifying and humiliating as it is to have her life utterly exposed to Jesus, she realizes that knowing everything about her has not kept Jesus from offering her water, water that will spring up to eternal life, water that, if she drinks it, you will never be thirsty again. And she drinks it. She experiences the transformational power of the forgiveness of sins. She experiences something at the heart of Christianity. She is fully known and fully loved. She does not have to wonder if Jesus' love is conditional on only knowing what's on the surface. Or what's in the middle depth. She sees she is fully known, and if she is still loved, she is fully loved. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life.*

Now transpose these two stories back into our psychedelic thought experiment. Imagine Jesus has come to visit you by the shore of your soul-pond. Are you going to be more Nicodemus or more Samaritan woman? Who are

we kidding—we're all Nicodemus. We're all terrified of anyone, much less God, seeing the hidden, deep-down-dark parts of ourselves. We work frantically on the landscaping of our lives. We'll try desperately to distract God and anyone else with all the pretty Lilly pads and dragon-flies on the surface of our lives. All the soccer trophies and G.P.A.'s and promotions at work and the report cards of our overachieving children and the vacation we were just so lucky to take and when all else fails we just run away. We run away from God. We just slink back into the darkness.

So for all us Nicodemus's in the room: Hear the good news of the Samaritan woman. Since it's Trinity Sunday, let me try to put it in all its Trinitarian glory. *For God so loves the world.* God loves the world because God created the world. God loves you because God created you. God created you and your pond in the first place. And that's enough right there. to qualify as an object of God's affection. But it doesn't stop there.

*For God so loved the world that he sent his Son.* God sent his Son to stand beside you on the shore. And to stare with you all the way to the bottom of the pond. And then as every successive layer of your soul is revealed to look you in eye and say "Yes, I know. I love you still. I will love you always." It still doesn't stop.

God sent his Son so that God could stand by you on the shore and say, "I know what it's like to contain multitudes of complexity within one's own soul. I know what's it's like to hold things in your heart nobody else knows about. I have lived among you as one of you."

*God sent his Son so that you may have everlasting life.* God not only knows everything about you, God not only loves you still, God not only knows what it's like to be you, God by his Spirit dives into the water of your life and, well, swims around. For those who believe, God resides in and with you. The Spirit of God descends to you and sings your unclean lips with a coal of forgiveness. The Spirit of God descends into your heart so God's Spirit can cry "Abba, Father" in your voice. God does not leave you alone to perish with whatever's at the bottom of your pond, but raises you to new life of everlasting joy. One in which you are fully known and fully loved.

The point is this: You may be scared by what you see at the bottom of your pond, but God is not. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life.

Amen.