

Nicodemus

He came by night. The man called Nicodemus, a name which means “victorious among the people,” a leader among those many considered most righteous in Israel, the Pharisees, came at night. Perhaps, as some scholars suggest, it was because the night was the best time to study Torah, after the day’s tasks were done, when one could devote one’s full attention to God’s Law without interruption. He came by night, perhaps, to be sure he could give his full attention to this fascinating new teacher, the Rabbi from Galilee who had emerged suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, at the center of the study of God’s word, Jerusalem. He came by night, this leader of the Pharisees. Perhaps, as other scholars think, he came by night because he didn’t want to be seen by others. Perhaps he was trying to keep his visit to this radical new teacher a secret from his fellows on the Sanhedrin. Perhaps he was there on their behalf, a secret envoy, with the mission of learning more about this threat to their authority, perhaps catching him in a verbal misstep. He came by night, John tells us in this most theological, most metaphorical of canonical gospels, and perhaps that is merely the author’s setting of the story, a way of pointing out to readers and listeners that, despite Nicodemus’ learning and standing in the community, where the truth of real relationship with God was concerned, he was in the dark. Nicodemus may have been victorious among the people, but in matters of the spirit, he was actually at a loss. He came by night. Perhaps the correct interpretation is some combination of these three ideas. Maybe not even Nicodemus himself would be able to say.

Nicodemus greeted Jesus with respect, almost with effusive praise. Was he sincere? It depends in part upon your interpretation of his coming by night. This could certainly be a ruse to get Jesus to open up and say something that could be used against him later. The context of the story may even suggest this. Immediately before the Nicodemus story, at the end of chapter 2, we read this: “When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.” There are links in the Greek between that passage and this that are unfortunately obscured in our NRSV translation. The word *ανθρωπος*, human being, appears in each. In the former, “Jesus knew all *ανθρωπος* ... knew what was in all *ανθρωπος*.” In our passage, “Now there was an *ανθρωπος* named Nicodemus...” It may be that Jesus does not respond in a conventional and polite way to Nicodemus’ greeting because he doesn’t trust him. His abrupt and rather odd response, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” may be a way of turning the tables this spy for the Sanhedrin. But it may also be Jesus’ way of responding to the questions that he knows are at the heart of Nicodemus’ visit, questions he has not even had time yet to ask. There is a hint that John is sympathetic to Nicodemus. In speaking of Jesus’ miracles and works, Nicodemus terms them as “signs,” impossible to perform without the presence of God. This is the same word that John uses over and over again in this Gospel. From John’s viewpoint, the miracles of Jesus are all about what they point to, expressions of life in the Kingdom of God. Near the end of the book, he writes, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” There are other hints in John that Nicodemus is sincere in his greeting to Jesus, that he really does see God at work in this Galilean. In chapter 7, he falls out with his colleagues over their condemnation of Jesus without benefit of a hearing. And after Jesus’ death, it is Nicodemus who helps Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus.

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Jesus' first words to Nicodemus must have been surprising in a number of ways. Again, Jesus is certainly not following polite protocol, answering a compliment with a compliment. Instead, he issues what could be considered a challenge, even an insult. "Very truly, I tell you," he says, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." But to most Jews, and certainly to a leader of the Pharisees like Nicodemus, to be born a Jew, a child of Abraham, was to be part of the Kingdom of God by birth. Nicodemus is taken aback. What could Jesus mean, saying such a thing to him?

If we are to understand the interchange here between Jesus and Nicodemus, we must understand yet another bit of word play in Greek by John. Jesus says that to see the Kingdom of God, one must be born *ανωθεν*. It is a word that can be translated as "from above," or "anew, again." Our NRSV translation has chosen to render Jesus' statement as "born from above," which makes Nicodemus' response unintelligible unless one either knows Greek or remembers this verse from another translation, such as the King James, the RSV or the NIV, where the more familiar "born again" is used. The NRSV translators' choice of "from above" does make sense in the context of Jesus' next statements about being born of the Spirit.

There is a good deal of ambiguity in Nicodemus' response to Jesus. Is he deliberately misunderstanding Jesus or is he genuinely perplexed? Is this Nicodemus the stooge of the Sanhedrin or Nicodemus the seeker? Should we hear his question as disdainful, "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" or as confused, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Those are the two standard choices in interpreting this passage. I wonder if they don't give Nicodemus enough credit. If indeed Nicodemus has come as an honest seeker, with all of his knowledge of the Law and the Prophets, with his likely awareness of the message of John the Baptizer and his call for repentance, he may already be thinking about the importance of starting anew. How often, I wonder, has Nicodemus sung or prayed the words of David, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." Is Nicodemus really saying to Jesus, "How can I, an old man with decades of training, with years of ingrained habits, throw all that away to start again?"

To hear Nicodemus' question as one that is both sincere and thoughtful is to hear a question asked with some anguish. If what Nicodemus hears is Jesus saying, "To be in God's will you must throw away all you think you know and start all over again," then Nicodemus hears Jesus' call to him as difficult if not impossible. To be born again would seem to imply a complete and immediate change, right here, right now.

There are those who, over the centuries since John recorded these words, have taken Jesus' words to mean just that and have greeted them with joy. For those who are mired in brokenness and rebellion, the prospect of a fresh start, a clean break with the past, can be liberating. For them, the admonition to be "born again" is good news indeed. But that is not the experience of all of us. For many, there is no clear cut "conversion experience" as our modern Evangelical understanding of the experience of being "Born Again" would seem to require. Instead, there is a slow dawning of understanding, a lifelong movement towards God, albeit one with many starts and stops, stalls and reversals, mountain tops of clarity, valleys of wandering.

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If indeed we are called to be born again, then for most of us, rather than being a single, life-changing experience that alters our path forever, it is more likely to be the kind of experience that Martin Luther described. Luther wrote of “*daily* dying and rising with Christ,” of “*daily* putting to death the old Adam,” that is, the old self which keeps trying to reassert itself during our life in Christ. I will cheerfully claim, in solidarity with my Evangelical sisters and brothers, to be a “Born Again Christian,” but it is Luther’s version of “Born Again” that I claim rather than that which some have called “crisis conversion.” As I’ve said here before, I knew no crisis at the time of my confession of faith, simply the realization that it was time for me to take such a step. And I have known the joy of spiritual rebirth time and time again since that night in early 1970 when I walked the aisle. It comes whenever I feel the touch of the Spirit of God, whenever I am caught with joy and awe at the splendor of God’s creation, whenever I allow myself to be aware of the deep love that binds me to my wife, when I see the smile of one of my children, hear a word of encouragement from a friend, find myself singing along to a joyous song, enjoy the wind in what’s left of my hair on a sunny day in my car.

Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Some believe that he is here referring to the necessity of baptism. If so, it is likely the baptism of John to which Jesus is referring, the baptism in recognition of repentance, of turning away and starting anew. But, like a good Baptist, I’m uncomfortable with that interpretation. After all, our movement has traditionally rejected any notion of the salvific efficacy of baptism, the notion that the act of immersion confers saving grace. Rather, Baptists have historically understood baptism as a symbol, an act we perform to say to the world that we are now committed to following the way of Jesus, deeply meaningful to those involved but not a requirement of our relationship with God. So, I’m inclined to agree with those who see in Jesus’ words a reference to physical birth, to the “breaking of water” that accompanies the birth of a child. In order to be a part of the Kingdom, the Beloved Community, we must be fully human, just as Jesus was, ready to reach out to our brothers and sisters in love and enter into relationship with them. But we must also be born of the Spirit, as aware of our spiritual nature as we are of our physical nature, as comfortable with our relationship with God the Father as we are with our human parents, our friends, our loved ones. To claim the Spirit as Mother implies an immediacy of relationship, with intentional contact between our spirit and God as often as we have physical contact with our parents as children.

Being born of the Spirit also answers any concern we, like Nicodemus, might have over what it is that we have to do in order to gain the Kingdom. We are not called to give birth; we are called to allow ourselves to be born or perhaps simply to realize that we have been born. In his book, [Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith - How We Can Be Passionate Believers Today](#), Marcus Borg writes, “Being born again is the work of the Spirit. Whether it happens suddenly or gradually, we can’t make it happen, either by strong desire and determination or by learning and believing the right beliefs. But we can be intentional about being born again.” The moment at which we begin to wonder about spiritual things, what our purpose in the world could be, whether there is a God who is concerned about us, we begin to realize that we have a spiritual birth. When we nurture that part of ourselves, work on a vital relationship with the Living God, we start living what Jesus called eternal or abundant life. Nicodemus had already been born from above; Jesus just wanted him to see it.

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Jesus had some more to say that I imagine was disturbing to Nicodemus and may be to us, sometimes, as well. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was committed to living by the Law. So careful were the Pharisees of God's Law, that they created additional restrictions and rules for their lives, the Oral Law, which they called "a fence around Torah," lest they come too close to breaking one of God's commandments. But living a life as one born of the Spirit has nothing to do with the landmarks and signposts of law. Jesus told Nicodemus, "The 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." Nicodemus wanted to know how he must behave and believe to be worthy of the Kingdom of God. But Jesus told him it just didn't work like that. Rev. Dr. Laura Mendenhall, a Presbyterian scholar and president of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA, writes, "Jesus told Nicodemus that life in God's kingdom cannot be earned or achieved. One is simply born into God's kingdom and living in the Spirit cannot be controlled, charted, or calculated... Jesus told Nicodemus that to be born of the wind would mean allowing the Spirit to propel him along the way without any sense of his old securities. To be born of the wind would mean trusting God's love for him and for all people." To understand that one is born of the Spirit is to enter into a life of freedom and wonder.

Nicodemus must have been overwhelmed. The final words in this conversation are a question, perhaps squawked indignantly, perhaps whispered with awe: "How can these things be?" It sounds like a question from Israel's very beginning, echoed twice in Jesus' own family story. You may remember that when the strangers at the oaks of Mamre promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son, "Sarah laughed to herself, saying... 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old.'" And the response came, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Or how the angel told Zechariah in the Temple that he and Elizabeth would have a son. Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." Or Mary saying to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" God's good news is constantly surprising, especially when it comes to God's plan working itself out in unexpected births. It is surprising even for those who have dedicated their life to following and serving God. The Spirit blows how it chooses.

There is, however, one path that we may be sure the Spirit will take again and again and again. It is the path of love. For poor overwhelmed Nicodemus, thrashing about in the darkness of not understanding, Jesus makes a clear statement of God's intent: "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."

It must have been another bombshell for Nicodemus, leader of the Pharisees, so concerned with ritual cleanliness, with separating himself from all that was unclean, especially from the Gentiles, the *goyim* who were not God's Chosen People. God loved the *world*? The *whole* world? God sent the Messiah to bring life to the world? Weren't the ancient enemies of Israel to be conquered? Weren't the Romans to be expelled from the holy city of Zion? Our near neighbor, The Rt. Rev. Bavi Edna Rivera, bishop suffragan of the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia, helps put what must have been Nicodemus' aghast reaction into perspective for us. "There is nothing in our culture," she writes, "(nor was there in that of Nicodemus) driven by money, success, strength, power and knowledge that can help us understand this kind of love. It is only through

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the Grace of God that we can see what God is doing. It is that same Grace of God that helps us understand the depth and height and breadth of that love: for the sake of the whole world. A love that gives itself to whomever would receive it. We seem to prefer love that is doled out to the deserving and those whom we deem worthy, but Jesus is clear, it is for the whole world, and it isn't for judgment but for life and salvation.”

God's gift of love is life. Eternal life, Jesus calls it here. Elsewhere in John, he uses the phrase, abundant life. We often hear it spoken of in the context of life after death. It is that and it is more. It is ζοε αἰωνίου, the life of the ages. It stands over and against the life of this age, life the way those who are not open to the Spirit think of life. Brian McLaren suggests that it could be defined as “an extraordinary life to the full, centered in a relationship with God.” It is life lived in pursuit of the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community. It is life lived in awareness that we are God's beloved children and that nothing can separate us from the extravagant, never-failing, gracious love of God. As I think of the story of Nicodemus recorded by John, I think Nicodemus must have finally understood that. In his last recorded act in the gospel, Nicodemus goes with Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus' body from the cross to the grave. He has brought with him the burial spices, over one hundred pounds of them. It is an extravagant gift to answer that extravagant love that Jesus introduced him to. Even for a wealthy man, it would have been a sacrificial gift. Nor was that all that Nicodemus was willing to give up for Jesus' sake. By his act, he exposed himself as a likely follower of Jesus, risking rejection and even arrest by his powerful colleagues on the Sanhedrin. By his act, he rendered himself ritually unclean, unable to participate in the remainder of the feast of Passover, one of the most important observances for this very observant Jew. But for all his false starts, his timidity, his poking around the edges, Nicodemus, it seems, was finally claiming that new birth, opening himself up to let the powerful wind of the Spirit sweep through his life.

What about us? Are we born again? Not just in the good old Evangelical sense of the term but open to the workings of the Spirit in our lives, allowing God to propel us along in God's way, ready to be instruments of God's love even for those we're pretty sure don't deserve it. Are we like Nicodemus at the beginning of the story, questioning, perhaps cynical, wondering if Jesus really has anything new to tell us, anything that will change our lives? Or are we like Nicodemus at the end of the story, ready to give up everything we thought we knew to follow the one who is the way, the truth and the life? Wherever we are, God is ready to receive us into the Beloved Community, to receive us and mother us and never let us go. For God, our Mother and our Father, our Loving Creator, 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, abundant life, the life of the ages. 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. Thanks be to God!