

John 3:1-17

We really don't know much about Nicodemus in today's story. He was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews. He was an expert, whose specialty was religion. We can make an educated guess that he was also smart-likely a lawyer who knew what kind of person he was supposed to be and exactly how life was to be lived. He probably had a plan for his life and tried to live by the Jewish Law. He had studied the scrolls and memorized the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). We don't know for certain everything about Nicodemus, but we do know that he didn't want everyone knowing he was meeting Jesus because they met in the dark. Something or someone compelled Nicodemus to meet up with Jesus. What was Nicodemus really looking for that night?

Nicodemus begins the conversation: we've heard about you, Jesus. We've heard about the miraculous sign of the water to wine thing at the wedding. There's SOMETHING about you, Jesus. We can't lay our fingers on it, but we respect it. You act like someone with the presence of God on you. The "we" was more than likely who Nicodemus represented- a group of Jews who were curious about Jesus. But what was Nicodemus up to in the dark of the night with Jesus? Did he even know for sure? Whatever it was, with these words a door is opened and Jesus steps through and speaks of the metaphor of being born of water and spirit and of the wind that we can hear but cannot see and how we cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes. Many scholars believe Jesus was referencing baptism here, as baptism is a concrete sign of the Spirit's work and of Jesus' promise of new life and identity. Jesus points out that the wind is mysterious and uncontrollable. It does what it will, goes where it will. "So it is," Jesus says, "with

everyone who is born of the Spirit” (v. 8b). And Nicodemus, the knowing one, all of a sudden is alarmingly confused- not enlightened.

Faith isn't about figuring it all out; faith is about living and trusting. In the Gospels, “often when folks think they ‘have it’ and have ‘arrived,’ Jesus challenges them further” (workingpreacher.com, Sherri Brown). Specifically in John's Gospel, Jesus often speaks on a spiritual or metaphorical level while his hearers understand him literally. This is the case when Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born again and Nicodemus thinks Jesus is telling Nicodemus to go back into his mother's womb and be born all over again. “Nicodemus shows his attempt to understand Jesus based on what he already knows to be true, by ignoring the possibility of being born from above, and showing the impossibility of being born again” (Zachman). And “Jesus challenges Nicodemus to move from theory to practice, from knowledge to faith, from curiosity to commitment” but that's always easier said than done, isn't it (workingpreacher.com, Judith Jones)? Nicodemus is a complex figure who “may not be reduced to a hypocritical believer or admirer, but may rather be seen as a work in progress, on his way from being intrigued by Jesus to believing in Jesus” (Randall C. Zachman, *FOW*). This is where I wonder if there are some of us who can relate to Nicodemus, as maybe we find ourselves on similar paths? Or maybe in our talk about being “born again Christians,” we have joined Nicodemus in his mistranslation?! Yes, the Greek word has a double-meaning- either “born from above” or “born again/anew.” But why struggle thinking about something in a new way- after already having reached establishment – accomplishment – a settled knowing? Why rediscover something I have already figured out? – that may be what Nicodemus was thinking but in fairness, we

aren't told. Jesus clarifies Nicodemus' misunderstanding by highlighting the source of the birth from above, which is the Holy Spirit, who moves wherever She will and offers us the gift of faith.

Many of us, like Nicodemus, find ourselves in our accustomed rut. It makes me ask myself – and I encourage you to ask yourself – what does my one-sided or formulaic approach to Christianity leave out? Am I so invested in the allusion of keeping my faith so neat and tidy, that I want to minimize its weirdness? It's Otherness? It's offensiveness? It's mysteriousness? Maybe I don't want to take a second look either. Do I cling too tightly to what I know – that I won't consider it anew- with fresh eyes- be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in my life? Friends, "God is never static within us. A static notion of God makes everything else static, too. The notion of salvation is continuously and actively revealed in the Scriptures and anybody who has paid attention to their inner life or read history books surely recognizes that life and love are cumulative, growing, and going somewhere that is always new and always more. Perhaps it is the newness and nonfamiliarity of which we are afraid" (Richard Rohr, devotion 5.30.21)? "This made me think of a scene from the novel *Jayber Crow* by Wendell Berry. In the story, the narrator and main character Jayber Crow, originally named Jonah, is reflecting on his life. After the death of his parents, his aunt and uncle took him in but then he was sent to a church-run children's home. For a while Jonah felt called to be a preacher, but he kept getting into what he called "doctrinal trouble" because he questioned almost everything. Part of his problem was that after reading the Gospels, Jonah was convinced that "Christ did not come to found an organized religion but came instead to found an unorganized one." If so, he was

certainly successful. Even as a child, Jonah seemed to know instinctively that the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be squeezed into the narrow little boxes of our institutional formats. But that did not sit well with most of the ministers and nearly all of the churches he knew as he was growing up. Jonah considered himself, "...a lost traveler wandering in the woods, needing to be on his way somewhere, but not knowing where." Eventually, the "somewhere" turned out to be Port William, Kentucky, the little town in which he had lived before going to the children's home. There, to support himself, he became the town barber and a part time janitor in the church. The town-folks nicknamed him **Jayber**. For the first time in his life he felt "at home." After Jayber Crow retired from his work as a barber, he moved out of town to a cabin by the river. There, as he looks back over the story of his life, he realizes that he has never, "**lived by plan.**" He says, "Nearly everything that has happened to me has happened by surprise. *All* the important things have happened by surprise. And whatever has been happening has usually happened before I had time to expect it. The world doesn't stop because you are in love or in mourning or in need of time to think. And so when I have thought I was in my story or in charge of it, I really have been only on the edge of it, carried along" (Allen McSween, CPM devotional, Jan. 2020).

"Apparently, what we 'know' can confine us and prevent us from embracing the mysterious life of the Spirit and God's own possibilities" (Gench). What brings Nicodemus to Jesus were the signs, but I wonder if it was so much more? So much that couldn't be articulated at that moment though Jesus tried. In the context of this conversation, Christ's divine origins are revealed. Christ descends from above to bring the truth to heaven for humankind. He is indeed truth in the flesh. He comes to be a source of healing and salvation, much like Moses' serpent,

lifted up on a pole in the wilderness (Num. 21:8-9), brings healing to anyone who looks up at it in faith. Jesus too is lifted up on the cross, so that whoever looks up at him in faith will be saved. God gives God's only son to save the world, not to condemn it" (Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *FOW*). Therein lies the possibility of new birth and new life: "in the cross that brings us face-to-face with the fullness of the life-giving love of God in Christ, and the rivers of living water that flow from it" (Gench).

Let me back up here- Moses and the serpent in the wilderness is an OT reference that Nicodemus would've known well. **Jesus uses this story to teach Nicodemus more fully about being born from above, which is based entirely on what God is doing in him.** A quick recap: in the book of Numbers, there is a scene where the Israelite people disobey God because they're upset that God brought them out of slavery into the wilderness, so God sends serpents among them who bite them and some die. The people beg for Moses to intervene, and Moses does intervene to God on their behalf. God then tells Moses to make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live (v. 8). So Moses made the serpent bronze and anytime someone got bitten, Moses would lift up the snake, and they would look at it and be healed. Just as Moses' act of lifting up the serpent saved the people from death, so Jesus' crucifixion saves all who turn in faith- even with their questions and confusion- from death to eternal life, which is a synonym for being born from above. Being born from above is not only entering into new life in relationship with God but also testifying to what God is doing in your life through the work of the Holy Spirit. **Rebirth into God's kingdom, which is present now as a gift from God, comes not by knowledge or doctrine but by faith.** As evidenced here, Nicodemus is unable to enter into new life

through his intellect. Maybe “Nicodemus is to be found wherever one whose life is secure must face those whose life is insecure, or who struggle in the cause of God, and decide to say, ‘I am one of them’” (Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*)? Only after Jesus’ crucifixion does Nicodemus seem to take a step toward commitment when he prepares Jesus’ body for burial. “This risky act signals a change of heart, the beginning of a transformation- though it is clear that he does not yet understand who Jesus is” (Jones). “I believe; help my unbelief.” This is the faith of Nicodemus and probably the faith of many of us here. God works on us; God works within us just as in Nicodemus, making us free for God in a way we may never have imagined. A way that causes Jayber to be dismissed by some leaders in the church. God saves us despite what we think we know and despite our disbelief or best logical arguments. “Out of the darkness of night, the domain of ignorance and misunderstanding, we bring our questions, and those questions are addressed by the Word made flesh, bringing light through words of new life and fresh perspective” (Judith M. McDaniel, *FOW*). Whether we’re more like Nicodemus or Jayber, we worship a dynamic and unfolding God who offers grace and newness of life to even those who try to say no but are still drawn in. After all, who else can bring the dead to life? Who else can call into existence that which doesn’t yet exist and make all things, everywhere, new? In what ways are you open to God’s Spirit at work in you- to being born from above? To recognize that God through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit is still creating, redeeming and sustaining the world God so loves. Thanks be to God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.