

John 3:1-17 (NRSV)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. [2] He 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." [3] Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." [4] Nicodemus 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?" [5] Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. [6] What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. [7] Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' [8] 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." [9] Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" [10] Jesus 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. [12] If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? [13] No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. [14] And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] that 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.

THE GRAND CANYON AND FAITH

I've never had an opportunity to see the Grand Canyon. But, those who have tell me that no description, no photograph and no video can really do it justice. If you want to understand the majesty of the Grand Canyon, you have to see it for yourself.

In the same way, in our passage for today Jesus is telling Nicodemus that in order to see the kingdom of God; you have to experience it for yourself. It's not something that you can read about or watch on TV. It's not something that you can learn from others.

It is a personal encounter with the living God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus tells us what he told Nicodemus one night long ago. "You must be born again."

TROUBLE WITH BORN AGAIN

That phrase "born again" is still a controversial phrase. Some people speak glowingly of being a "born again" Christian. But, what does it mean to be born again?

Whenever people use that phrase some think of narrow minded Christians who insist that their way is the only right way. More than one Christian has been accosted by an enthusiastic believer who asked with intensity, "Brother have you been born again?"

And quite often with a suspicious glance, the object of this inquiry replies, "What are you talking about? What are you trying to say?"

Nicodemus seemed to have trouble with that phrase as well. He said, "That sounds crazy. How can a person be born again? How can a person enter his mother's womb a second time? I've taken time to come visit you for a polite theological discussion and you talk to me about being born again."

You may have noticed that this phrase is translated differently in our New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Instead of translating that phrase "born again" it is translated in the NRSV "born from above." Either translation would be correct.

Apparently there is some ambiguity in this phrase, and Nicodemus seems to be taking it literally instead of figuratively. The idea seems absurd. Nicodemus does not understand, and neither do we.

IN THE DARK

It's appropriate that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night because Nicodemus is in surely "in the dark." Nicodemus, a leader and teacher of God's people does not understand even the most basic things about the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Nicodemus doesn't understand what God is doing in the world. The winds of the Spirit are blowing, but Nicodemus and his fellow Pharisees don't feel the breeze.

Don't think that I'm being critical of Nicodemus. I can appreciate his inability to understand Jesus. Don't tell anyone, but sometimes I think that I'm in the same boat. Like Nicodemus I've been trained in the faith. I've been to seminary, and I'm supposed to be a leader in the church.

But, sometimes I think that I'm still in the dark when it comes to Jesus. Jesus says something crazy like "you must be born again" or "love your enemies" or "do good to those who persecute you" or "blessed are those who mourn," and I respond, "What are you talking about Jesus? How can this be?"

Oh, I can come up with a plausible explanation for what Jesus says. I can read those who have commented on these well worn passages down through the ages. I know the "right" answers. But, there has always been a part of me that finds the message of Jesus jarring.

After all these years studying the Bible, I still have a hard time wrapping my mind around the words of Jesus. How can I be born again? Can an old dog like me really be taught some new tricks? How can I actually love my enemies? How can I do good to those who persecute me?

This does not come naturally. I want to hurt my enemies. I want those who persecute me to get what they deserve. I want to do my own thing and not God's thing.

I know. I shouldn't talk that way. Jesus tells us something different, and I preach something different every week. But, I have a hard time hearing those sermons. Like Nicodemus I want to say, "How can these things be?"

Sometimes I wonder if Jesus would respond to me as he responded to Nicodemus, "You're a preacher and yet you don't understand these things?"

Weren't you listening in seminary? What have you been doing with your time all these years?"

And I confess all this to you because I think that some of you might be just like me. You've been in church all your life. You've heard what Jesus has to say about the kingdom of God. And yet you feel like in some ways you're still in the dark when it comes to Jesus. Jesus speaks and you think to yourself,

"How can this be? What do you mean when you say that I must be born again? What is this mysterious Spirit that is supposed to be blowing in my life? Could it be that I have been in church all my life and still not really be a disciple of Jesus?"

That's really what makes this story a bit unnerving to those of us who have been a part of the church all our lives. Suppose we have been in the dark all these years? Suppose we have just been playing church while missing the essence of faith?

HEARSAY FAITH

A preacher told of having a conversation and someone's name came up. The preacher said without thinking, "Oh him? He's a real loser. He's a loafer, and a flop."

The preacher's friend replied,
"Do you really know him? I don't think he's that way at all."

The preacher began to quickly backtrack, apologize and say that in fact he didn't have much evidence on which to base such a negative judgment. He was defining that person not on what he knew personally but on hearsay.

I wonder. Do we really know Jesus or are we just defining him on hearsay?

The problem with Nicodemus is that he thought that he knew Jesus but his remarks were all based on second hand knowledge. Nicodemus came to Jesus and said, "We know all about you. We know that you're a teacher come from God. We know that you do miraculous signs and that God's presence is with you."

Nicodemus thought he could understand Jesus. Jesus was a teacher, a person who wanted to do God's will. Jesus was one of them, and as a fellow teacher Nicodemus came that night to have a pleasant discussion about the fine points of theology. That's what people like him did with their free evenings.

But, Nicodemus was mistaken. Nicodemus didn't really know Jesus. He had heard rumors about Jesus. He had heard reports about Jesus. But, all that was hearsay. There was more to Jesus than what Nicodemus had heard and what his religious tradition taught.

Today many people make the same mistake. We want to define Jesus on the basis of hearsay and religious tradition. We want to talk about Jesus based upon second hand knowledge. And second hand knowledge is never good enough when it comes to understanding Jesus.

Researchers tell us that one of the reasons our own denomination is losing members is that we are failing to pass on the faith to many of our young people. Somehow the vision of Jesus that we have presented to them is just not very compelling.

Jesus is not a real, animating spiritual presence in their life. They know some stories about Jesus; they have heard some things about Jesus. But, they don't know Jesus.

There's a big difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus. When Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again" the "you" is plural. Jesus wasn't just speaking about Nicodemus; Jesus was also speaking about us ... all of us.

BORN OF THE SPIRIT

The born again experience is necessary. But, what is it?

It's a total reorientation of our life. It is a change brought about by the power of God's Spirit. And this change is based upon the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Born again people have new priorities. Born again people have new goals. Born again people have a new attitude toward life. The Spirit of Jesus invades their lives and turns them inside out and upside down.

This kind of change does not come from a tweaking of our theology. This kind of change comes from the work of the Spirit. We cannot do for ourselves what needs to be done. God must remake us. God must change us in a way that we cannot change ourselves.

If I'm going to be a disciple of Jesus, if I'm going to love my enemy and do good to those who persecute me, it's going to take more than a minor theological makeover. It's going to take a miracle.

If I'm going to deny myself, take up a cross and follow Jesus, it's going to take more than good preaching and right theology. It's going to take the Spirit of God blowing into my life like hurricane Charley.

According to Jesus, that's exactly how the kingdom of God comes. The wind of God's Spirit comes out of nowhere and changes everything. We might not understand. We might not know where it comes from. But, we can see the results.

A new birth, a new creation is possible because God makes it possible. The essence of Jesus' message is found in this single conviction. If we want to see God's kingdom, then we must be born again.

The phrase "born again" does not refer to what we can do or say to receive salvation. It's about what God does. Did we make any choices when it came to our birth? No, our birth was something that happened to us. In the same way the new birth is not about what we do, but what God does for us in Jesus.

Birth is the one way that everything in life is renewed. The human race would soon grow old and perish if babies were not born. In the same way faith will grow old and perish if the Spirit of Christ does not come into our lives and change things. The Christian religion will soon grow senile and ineffective unless we the people are renewed and recreated by the Spirit of the living God.

REBIRTH TODAY

Some commentators suggest that Nicodemus really did understand what Jesus was talking about when he used that phrase “born again.” Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and the Pharisees talked quite a bit about that day when the Messiah would come.

They believed that when the Messiah would come the entire world would be renewed. They said that this transformation would be like a rebirth, a new creation. They said, “One day when the Messiah comes, then the whole world will be reborn.”

Like the Pharisees we’re comfortable talking about that future day. We’re comfortable talking about that tomorrow when the Messiah comes, as long as that day is far, far away.

But, it’s not so comfortable when the Messiah is confronting us personally and saying, “Guess what? Time’s up. The kingdom is here and now. And you must be born again in order to see the kingdom.”

That kind of personal choice is difficult. Like Nicodemus we have much invested in our present life. Starting over again seems like such an unrealistic thing to do. It’s okay mind you to talk about a theoretical Messiah who will one day make all things new. We might even derive a bit of comfort from such ideas.

But, it’s quite another thing to personally meet the Messiah who is talking about change that starts here and now with us. That’s what happened to Nicodemus.

The rabbis often compared the conversion of a Gentile to Judaism as a “new birth.” But, in this encounter Jesus tells this prestigious religious leader that his membership in the nation of Israel is not enough to save him. The decisive new beginning demanded by God was not only for pagan proselytes. It was also for him, one of the most eminent leaders of Israel.

I understand the urgency and commitment of those who refer to themselves as born again Christians. In fact I count myself among them.

But, I think that we often make a crucial mistake. When we refer to ourselves as born again Christian we often talk only about what has

happened in the past. We claim to have been reborn and talk about an experience associated with this rebirth, this encounter with the Spirit of Christ.

But, being born again is about more than just one experience. Rebirth is not a once and done deal. Rebirth is a radical openness to the blowing of God's Spirit every day of our life.

Even if we are eminent leaders in the church, even if we are expert theologians and preachers, it would be presumptive of us to think that we have a handle on Jesus. The encounter with Nicodemus teaches us that we're in the dark when it comes to the kingdom of God. We don't have a handle on Jesus. Jesus has a handle on us. We're not the ones asking the questions and making the judgments. That job belongs to Jesus.

LIFT HIGH THE CROSS

Our job is to catch the breeze, the spiritual breeze that is blowing even today. The God revealed in Jesus is a God who sacrifices on our behalf. Jesus died on a cross for the sins of the world, and we find salvation when we look toward this source of grace.

In making this point Jesus talked about something that happened to God's people in the wilderness. The people were grumbling about their lot in life, and God punished them by sending fiery serpents among them. The people cried out for salvation, and God told Moses to make a representation of those serpents, and when the people were bitten they could look up and be healed. Moses did as he was told, and when the people looked up at a serpent of brass on a pole, they were healed.

To put another way, when they looked up at a symbol of their own disobedience and punishment, they were saved.

Jesus in anticipating his own death on the cross told Nicodemus that salvation would come to the world in a similar but greater way. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so the Son of Man would be lifted up on the cross.

The cross is the symbol of human sin. The Son of God became a human being. Heaven came down to earth in Jesus. He came to earth to save the

world. And what did we do? We killed him in the most inhumane way possible. We crucified him.

When we look up at the cross, we see not only what people did to Jesus long ago; we see our own sinfulness. When we look up at the cross, we see an old way of life, and an old way of thinking that needs to be crucified. But, when we look up at the cross we also see the salvation of God.

In our tradition the cross is empty. The Savior who was murdered by people he loved has been raised from the dead. He is risen to rule the world and bring salvation to all peoples and nations. The sign of death and destruction has been transformed by God into a means of salvation.

And it is the message of the cross that makes a new birth possible. Jesus tells us if we want to be born again, if we want to see the salvation of God we must look up at the cross. We must recognize our own sinfulness and humbly ask God to change us by the power of His Spirit and grace.

FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE DARK

Some people think that Christians are those who have it all figured out, that Christians are those who know all about Jesus and have no more questions about the faith. But, I have come to believe that just the opposite is true.

Christians are those who recognize that they are in the dark in this world and desperately need some light. Christians are those who come to Jesus at night. Christians are those who look up at the cross, the symbol of failure and see by the power of God's Spirit a symbol of hope and salvation. Christians are those who decide to follow Jesus even though they don't always understand him completely.

That's what Nicodemus did. This is not the last time we meet Nicodemus in John's gospel. The next time Nicodemus appears he is indeed looking up at a cross, the horrible bloody cross on which Jesus was crucified. It surely didn't seem like a symbol of salvation that day.

The disciples had all run away. But, Nicodemus was one of the few people who stayed. He lovingly buries the body of Jesus. He risked being associated with Jesus when everyone else had fearfully abandoned him. On

this day we see that Nicodemus is more than just a teacher of Israel. He is now a brave disciple of Jesus who dared to look up at the cross.

Being born again doesn't mean having everything figured out. Being born again means following Jesus wherever he leads ... and at the end of that long and winding road we will find a cross ... an empty cross that bridges the gap between heaven and earth ... an empty cross that offers hope and forgiveness for a broken world.

A man grew up in a church that took great pride in demanding that all of their children memorize the whole Catechism. He was taught all the right answers but over the years he grew away from the church and lost his faith.

But, one dark night he came back to Jesus. He was born again.

He told a friend, "I wish that my church had asked me about my questions when I was a child. All they gave me was a list of answers. So, I got all the answers, but I never got the reasons for the answers. Now I've got Jesus who is a lot better than even the right answers."

My friends do you come to Jesus by night? Are you in the dark? Don't worry. Jesus invites you into the light, the light of his presence and salvation.

The Bible tells us that Jesus didn't come into this world to condemn the world. He came into the world to save the world, and he comes to save you. The breeze of God's presence can blow in your life.

You can, you must be born again.

Amen.