

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
March 12, 2017  
Second Sunday in Lent  
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Genesis 12:1-8  
Psalm 33:12-22  
Romans 4:1-17  
John 3:1-17

Quite often in life, and with biblical texts, *it is what we already know that gets us in trouble* and keeps us from seeing and hearing and experiencing even more. We grow so accustomed to viewing life or biblical stories through a certain set of lenses that it becomes virtually impossible to see them in any other way.

Ironically, this seems to be Nicodemus' problem in our Gospel lesson as he comes to visit with Jesus in the late hours of the night. He comes to Jesus with a *predetermined* set of convictions about what he knows is real, and about what he believes is possible: "Rabbi," he says, "We know that you are a teacher come from God. For no one could do the miraculous things you do if God were not with him."

To which Jesus says: "I assure you, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Much has been written about the phrase "born again" and especially the word translated "again." The word can mean both "again" or "anew," as well as "from above." Various English translations opt for the phrase "born again" (like

the KJV and NIV and NLT), and others choose the phrase “born from above” (like the NRSV).

To rightly hear this text, we should probably think in terms of both/and, and not either/or. For to be born anew speaks both of a *time* of birth (“again”) and the *place* from which this new birth is generated (“from above”).

But Nicodemus, when he hears Jesus say this, is incredulous. “How can anyone be born when he is old?” “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Nicodemus’ response here to Jesus is almost comical. Jesus is speaking spiritually and holistically, and Nicodemus is thinking solely in terms of the *literal*. This happens more than once in John’s Gospel, where Jesus speaks on one level, and his hearers read him on a different level. It’s like a sort of “cross talk” is occurring. Scholars call it the “Johannine irony.”

But in spite of Nicodemus’ literalism, his objections to Jesus should probably not be brushed aside as easily as we are prone to do. For in truth, being spiritually reborn *hurts*. Birth is scary. Children (and their mothers) scream. No one really wants to go through it.

Part of the trouble with birth (even though you’re not aware of it at the time) is that you are leaving a world where you understand all the rules, and you are entering a world in which everything you’ve previously known no longer applies.

You no longer get your food through an umbilical cord. You're no longer kept safe and warm in the uterus, but instead are exposed to the elements.

In a similar way, experiencing a spiritual birth and *entering a new world in which eternal life is possible – but in which you can no longer simply please yourself and seek your own aims – is as confusing as being born. It's awkward. It's difficult. It's painful.* And it is beyond your power to control and manipulate it.

But there is another reason why Nicodemus struggles to understand Jesus here. It is found in the *context* of this passage.

Prior to this in John's Gospel, John the Baptist arrives on the scene, where he preaches that the Kingdom of God is drawing near. He goes out to the Jordan River, where he calls on people to repent and to submit to baptism in preparation for the coming Kingdom. Interestingly, one of the persons who comes to be baptized is none other than *Jesus himself*.

But the religious leaders, including the Pharisees, reject John's baptism, challenging him and demanding to know *who* he thinks he is and *what* he thinks he is doing (John 1:19ff.)

And now, in our story, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. He thinks he has a pretty good idea *who* Jesus is, and *what* Jesus is doing. But Jesus says to Nicodemus: "Nicodemus, you have no clue. You need to be born of water and of

the Spirit.”

In other words, Nicodemus, *you need to stop rejecting the validity of John’s baptism.* Nicodemus -- you need to submit to baptism, to allow the Spirit of God to come and dwell in your heart.

The Pharisees and religious leaders had rejected John’s baptism, and their reason for doing so was very telling. Remember? They said to John, “We’re descendants of Abraham.” To which John said, “God can raise up these stones here as children of Abraham. Don’t count on that to save you.”

For years I have read this story, and I’ve always assumed that Nicodemus’ struggle here was in trying to believe that being born again was *possible*. But after this week, I’m wondering now if Nicodemus’ great problem was not so much that he rejects the *possibility* of the new birth, but rather he rejects that it is *necessary*.

To be born of water and of the Spirit requires submitting himself to forces beyond his control, and to Jesus, who will become the great “sign” for the people when he is lifted up on a pole in the way that Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness as a sign of deliverance for the children of Israel (cf. Numbers 21). It’s much easier to rely on your pedigree, your ancestry, and to keep things well in hand and under *your* control. It seems safer to domesticate Jesus, and to box up the work of the Spirit in ways that allow *us* to remain sovereign over our own lives rather than God.

In that way, we might not be all that different from Nicodemus. Given our human nature, we can go to great lengths to enter God's kingdom, yet do it in a way that allows *us* to stay in control of our lives.

But we should probably not be too hard on Nicodemus. I've often wondered how things turned out for him. How did his story end? We're not told here in John chapter three. But there are a couple of clues offered to us later in this Gospel.

In chapter 7, when the religious leaders and Pharisees are seeking to apprehend Jesus to put him to death, we are told, "Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 'Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?' "(7:50-51).

And later in the Gospel, after Jesus has been crucified, Joseph of Arimathea takes Jesus' body to prepare it for burial. There we are told:

"With Pilate's permission he [Joseph of Aramethea] took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs." (John 19:38ff.)

As we move our way through this season of Lent, we are confronted again with the painful reality that we are broken, that our lives are not always what we would like them to be or what God would like them to be. For a hundred different

reasons and in a hundred different ways *we* need a new start, a new beginning, a new way of seeing. A rebirth, of sorts.

But we cannot give birth to ourselves, or to the new life God wants to bring to us. The Spirit of God alone can do that.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, in the quietness of these moments if we listen carefully we will hear something. We will discern the wind of the Spirit of God, hovering and blowing its way across the chaos and brokenness of our lives. The source of that wind is the love of the Father God, whose Son came not to condemn us, but to save us. And in these tokens of bread and wine, the wind can blow across the rough places of your life, and make all things new.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.