

Are You Born Again?
The Second Sunday of Lent
Text: John 3:1-17

There's a lot going on in this gospel reading before us today. But I want to call your attention to the dynamics of this interpersonal encounter between Nicodemus—a leader of the Jerusalem Council—and Jesus of Nazareth, an upstart Jewish outsider from the northern hills of Galilee.

Notice that it's *nighttime*. Perhaps Nicodemus doesn't want his respectable neighbors to know the company he's keeping, so he avoids coming to Jesus during the daytime when he is likely to be seen.

But notice also that he claims to speak on behalf of others—he says “we know you are a teacher” rather than “I know...” That suggests he's been sent as a kind of emissary. It suggests that the Pharisees have been talking about this Galilean miracle-worker, which is quite possible since he has likely created quite a stir in Jerusalem.

But it's ambiguous, and hard for us to know with any certainty whether he is speaking on behalf of others with or without their consent. After all it's an age old trick in the synagogue and the church to say “you know, *people* are saying such and such”—and it may well be that what happened is that you said it to your spouse in the parking lot just before church. Saying “we” when it's really “I” can be its own cover of darkness.

In any event, it's the *signs*—the miracles—that have captured everyone's attention. Jesus is a dazzling healer! And Nicodemus recognizes that no one can do such signs apart from the presence of God, so he wants to know more about this rabbi.

Last week's gospel reading focused on Jesus' three temptations in the wilderness: to be spectacular, to be relevant, and to be powerful. We heard again last weekend about how Jesus *resisted* those temptations, and was ministered to by angels. But we get an important spiritual reminder today that rarely is temptation dealt with and put into a drawer—never to appear again. In fact, most of us face the same few temptations over and over again in our lives, in new guises. They also are as likely to play toward our gifts and our strengths as to our weaknesses. So we heard Jesus telling the devil last weekend: “no...I won't razzle-dazzle 'em in order to get them to follow me.” And yet it is precisely his ability to heal and his personal charisma that do in a sense draw people to him; he does “razzle dazzle 'em” with his healing powers. People like Nicodemus (and many others) are drawn to Jesus for what they can get out of the deal—and that leads to confusion that needs to be clarified.

Nicodemus is drawn to Jesus because he sees that the *signs* Jesus does are clearly of God. But Jesus responds to Nicodemus somewhat sharply: *Amen, Amen* (twice for extra dramatic effect!) —“truly, truly, I tell you that no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.” Now that sounds perhaps at first like something of a non-sequitor. But what Jesus is really saying is that if you see in my *only* a miracle worker you don't see me it all. If you see in me merely a magician you are not seeing what this is about.

This is a temptation still very much with us. People are tempted to join a church and come to Jesus perhaps because of the preaching, or the music, or the church school program, or a healing ministry. That's fine, and a parish like this one focuses in on these ministries and tries to do them well in order to draw people to Christ and to deepen people's relationship with Christ.

But the temptation is for people to come to church like customers—and we are all pretty used to being customers and consumers. We come, like Nicodemus, looking to see what we can get out of the deal. And yet to truly encounter Jesus, with our eyes wide-open, is to meet One who is heading toward the Cross, and who calls us to take up *our* crosses. To encounter Jesus is to be challenged and engaged and invited into ministry—and given a new commandment: to love one another. It is to be invited to be servants for the sake of the gospel.

We come perhaps to Jesus looking to “find ourselves”—in search of healing. We will get that with Jesus, but we may be asked to “lose ourselves first”—to take some risks—to see things from another perspective, before we get there.

Now that is not an easy sell, which is why so many churches these days take the easy way out and just treat people as “customers” rather than trying to form disciples. Forming disciples is difficult work. Yet I believe it is the ministry to which this congregation and to which all Christians are truly called. This encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus is at the heart of the gospel, and at the heart of what Christian discipleship is and is not about. Yes Jesus is a healer—because God is good and because God cares and because God yearns for all people to be whole in body, mind, and spirit. But the paradox is that we are called to participate in that reality and to share in that reality and even become instruments of that reality for others—not to merely be passive recipients of it.

To grasp all of this Jesus tells Nicodemus that you've got to be born—well, how exactly? The Greek is ambiguous and has three perfectly valid interpretations. It's *another*. So you can say (as the NRSV that we heard today does): “you've got to be born from above.” But if you look that up in a NRSV Bible you'll see a little notation, and at the bottom of the page a secondary translation that says: “you must be born anew.” If you are an NIV Bible-type, then you'll read, “you've got to be born again.” But there, too, you'll find a little note from the editors that says, in tiny little letters, “you've got to be born from above.”

So which is it: born from above, born anew, or born again? “Yes!” That's what is so hard about all translation work, because sometimes a word in one language means three things and there is no equivalent word to convey all three in other language. I suppose you could have Jesus saying: “you must be born anew/from above/again” but it's a bit clumsy to say the least!

Now I point this out because perhaps some of you have been approached on a street corner, or maybe even at Thanksgiving Dinner, by someone who asks you if you have been “born again?” Only they are very often pointing a finger at you, and they tie that language to a very specific kind of conversion experience and a very specific kind of faith claim that grows out of such an experience. If your experience doesn't “measure up” then what they may really be doing is telling you that you aren't really a Christian.

But if you listen to this text I think you will see that that aspect of a particular kind of Christian ideology has very little to do with this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. When Nick initially misses the point—he hears “*anóthen*” in a literal way and connects it only to a literal return to the womb, which Jesus says is silly—then Jesus responds by saying that what he is really talking about is being “born by water and the spirit.” Now you all know that language, right? Jesus is talking about Holy Baptism—which is one reason that the lectionary puts this reading into the context of Lent. *Because Lent is all about Baptism.*

In the early church Baptisms only happened at the Easter Vigil—after a long period of preparation. Lent was that season for final preparation before being buried with Christ, in order to be raised with him into a new resurrected life. So this is liturgical/sacramental language—and I think it’s way past time that Episcopalians re-claim it as such. If you are baptized by water and the spirit then you *are* born *anóthen*—regardless of what some may tell you about that. You’ve got to then begin to *live* into that reality, of course. You’ve got to respond to what God has done in your life. You can’t simply be a passive recipient. So even if it happened decades ago you can “wake up” to that claim God has on your life, and respond to it and re-affirm it. As you do you will begin to see the world through a very different set of glasses: through the lens of the Baptismal Covenant.

We may well initially come to Jesus because he’s a smart teacher, or a wonderful healer. But in Holy Baptism we claim more than that. We see in this Jesus the face of God—the Word-made-flesh, the One who will be “lifted up” on the Cross and on the third day raised again. By water and the spirit we are born *anóthen*—dying with him in order to be raised again to the new life of grace.

Think of it this way. The world says you are born, then you die, and then you become food for worms. So each and every day you are a bit closer to that end. It can make you fearful and anxious—and therefore of course in search of any healer who will promise eternal youth whether in the form of some elixir, or new diet, or a facelift, or whatever.

But the Christian says: no, that is backwards. We have already died, in baptism. We’ve been buried with Christ, and then raised to new life. So all that is left is for us to get busy living: to move deeper into that new Easter life. As we open our eyes to that reality we begin to see that God so loved the *world*—God so *loved* the world—and God so loves *us*—that by water and the Spirit we *have* been claimed, and marked, and sealed as Christ’s own forever. We have been born *anóthen*: anew and from above, and yes “again.”

So what happens to Nicodemus? Does he go away like the rich young ruler, sad because this is all too hard? Or does he become a disciple? In fact, he does re-appear on Good Friday. In John’s telling of that day’s events, he comes with Joseph of Arimathea to claim to corpse of Jesus. The text says that Joseph, a member of the Council, “was a disciple of Jesus.” It doesn’t make that claim of Nicodemus, only that he came with Joseph and that he brings “a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds of weight.” (John 19:39) Together Nicodemus and Joseph take Jesus’ body and bind it with linen cloths and with the spices, following the burial customs of the day; in broad daylight.

That suggests to me that Nicodemus was listening *and* that he was changed by this nighttime encounter. I pray that that happens for each of us this Lent as well: that we encounter Jesus again in this Lenten journey. And that in so doing we will touch the meaning of our Baptism in new ways. So that on Good Friday we will not be ashamed to be there, too, and to grasp anew that there is more to this Jesus than a man who can do great signs; for in Him there truly is new and abundant life.

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