

## John 3:1-17

### From Above

It happens to Ken and I more times than I wish. We are in a conversation and we think we are talking about the same thing but we are coming at it from such a different place that we don't make sense to each other. More than once we have become frustrated with one another because either Ken or I were not getting it! The "it" being the other person's point or perspective. We think so differently it is amazing that we manage to communicate with each other as well as we do.

It's what seems to be happening in this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. Jesus is saying one thing and Nicodemus is just not following and so asks questions that just are not going to get him the answers he may want, and certainly are not bringing answers that seem to clarify anything for him.

Nicodemus is an interesting character. His story is unique to the Gospel of John. He shows up three times. The first time was this clandestine night meeting. Nicodemus was of the Pharisee sect. He was a part of the group who were always testing Jesus. They certainly were not happy about this peasant teacher who always seemed to have the upper hand on them when they try to trap him with their questions and quizzes.

So, it seems there may be a couple of things going on here. It is hard to tell if Nicodemus' remarks about Jesus being a "teacher straight from God" adding, "No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren't in on it", are meant to flatter or are stating facts. It may be both. Nicodemus may really have believed that only someone sent from God could do these things, but I suspect that like many people, there is a side of him that is very skeptical about it being this guy Jesus in particular.

We really don't know the purpose of this meeting, but it is clear that Nicodemus has many questions. And the more Jesus speaks the more questions Nicodemus has. And the more Jesus answers the less Nicodemus understands.

In particular there is a challenge in understanding the "being born from above" stuff. The Greek word that is being translated here can mean "anew" "again", or "from above." It appears that Nicodemus lands on the "born again" meaning and gets stuck on it, taking the whole thing literally. We smirk as we get that there is no way one can be born again in the way the Nicodemus was imagining, so you would think he would have interpreted Jesus words using one of the other meanings of anew or from above, or at least seen that there was depth to the interpretation and meaning that could be garnered from what Jesus was saying, rather than taking things so literally.

One can imagine with these next words that Jesus is either frustrated or just finding the whole thing humorous. Still as you hear Jesus' response, listen for the words that speak about the Spirit, that Spirit that has been with Jesus and God all along and moves in creation and in each of us.

“<sup>5-6</sup> Jesus said [to Nicodemus], “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

Now to be say this is easy to understand would be simplifying all of this too much, just as Nicodemus tried to bring things down to the most literal of meanings. Yet the example of a baby is a wonderful starting spot. We can look at and touch a baby, yet each of us has watched as children grow and become adults and through each stage how they have developed their own way of being in the world. If you pay attention, cared to examine your own life, you will have noted it of yourself.

What Jesus is saying is the that part of a person which we cannot look at or touch, what becomes their spirit, is formed by what we cannot see or touch, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit that was “the wind hovering over the water in creation” is at work in us and in the world. It is in that Spirit that we are born from above. It is the Holy Spirit at work in us.

Jesus continues with, <sup>7-8</sup> “So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.”<sup>2</sup>

To tell you the truth, I find these words comforting, even if I struggle to grasp the meaning of it all. I hear this to mean that just like we have no idea how the wind blows, where it comes from or where it is headed next, we cannot interpret, direct, or know for certain how God, through the Holy Spirit, is at work in each of us and in each other, let alone the whole of the world.

Even without understanding it fully, this scripture can bring a measure of hope and trust that God is at work in each of us and that I don’t need to know the day or the experience that made me “born again” as I have been asked by some to be able to answer to their question. I don’t know when I was born again, I just know that since Jesus came on the scene we don’t have to worry about those details, we only need to pay attention to what God is up to in our lives and in the world around us. Our work is to continue to trust and believe that, <sup>16-18</sup> “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and

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<sup>1</sup> [The Message \(MSG\)](#) Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by [Eugene H. Peterson](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.”

Did you catch it? It is not in words that you may have memorized as a child, but in this story about Nicodemus is where you find John 3:16, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*” This verse alone tells us that whether we understand or not, no matter who we are, God so loved the world that Jesus showed up for us. And it is by believing in Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit that we are basically born from above.

This means that even though Nicodemus didn’t get it, Jesus came into the world for him, and thankfully came into the world for each of us. And because Jesus rose from the dead like the first born of creation, we get to live with the Holy Spirit working and moving in and through us. What an amazing thought and privilege.

What has often been missed with the memorization of and fixation on John 3:16 is the following verse that too has powerful words and a promise. Hear John 16 and 17 together...<sup>16-17</sup>“This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.”

Believing in Jesus is not meant to take from your life. So many people think that being a Christian sucks the life out of life, but it is just the opposite. To be a follower of Jesus, to believe in Jesus, means to be saved to live a life that is whole, that is truly life-giving, a life that is lived fully, right now and into our passing from this life to one fully in God’s presence. It is to have our world expand from being just about us to being about God’s kingdom which is more expansive than we can imagine.

By the way, remember I said that Nicodemus turns up three times in John’s gospel? Well, each time it seems that just maybe Nicodemus is inching his way to believing in Jesus. The second time is when Nicodemus seemingly comes to Jesus’ defense in the course of a pretty heated moment where the Pharisees wanted Jesus arrested. Nicodemus doesn’t push the issue and is shut down by his peers, but it looks like a step deeper into believing in Jesus. (John 7:50-52).

The third time we hear about Nicodemus in John’s gospel is when he and Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus’ body for burial after the crucifixion. Nicodemus brings a significant amount of a mixture of myrrh and aloes with him. (John 19:38-42) We don’t know much about Nicodemus other than he keeps showing up in more significant ways and times. It may speak to the way many of us slowly come to faith, to understanding, and to loving Jesus, even if and when we continue to question and learn. We are able to grow and deepen in faith.

I read that Nicodemus is the patron saint of curiosity. If that is the case then I really like him. Being curious has become my watch word or catch phrase to the point that I was given the gift of a wood sign that has the words “Be Curious” engraved into it. There are

so many reasons I have come to appreciate those two words. This short phrase expands one's possibilities, it allows for imagination and creativity. It also fits right into believing and belief in Jesus. I don't understand everything that I read in the Bible. I don't have an unshakable faith, but I can be curious about what God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, is doing.

We can be curious about what God is doing through the Holy Spirit in our world and in us. We can be curious about what it means to believe in Jesus and the way believing in Jesus can open up the kingdom of God and the Holy Spirit to us in ways that we are born from above.

We can be curious about a love so deep, so broad, and so high that it overflowed from the relationship between the Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit. Unable to be contained, that love must be shared and is shared in us, through us, and for us. We can be curious about what it means to be born from above by the Spirit of God. The 'wind-hovering-over-the-water' Spirit that was present at the time of creation and continues to live in and through us and all of creation.

So though we, like Nicodemus, have questions, all kinds of questions, we also like Nicodemus can continue to deepen in our curiosity and understanding. We can grow in faith and in love for the one that cannot be contained and who loved us so much that God's only Son came so that we may have abundant, whole, and lasting life. Amen.