

“Learning to see in the dark.”
Genesis 12:1-3 Romans 4:13-17 John 3:1-17

A pastor was trying to explain to a child that God is calling people everywhere in the world to believe in him. "God is much bigger than we imagine him to be and God can use all of us in lots of different ways to do his work everywhere," the pastor said. "God is everywhere!" "Everywhere?" asked the little boy.

"Everywhere!" said the pastor.

The boy went home and told his mother, "God is everywhere! The pastor said so." "Yes, I know," said the mother. "You mean he is even in the cupboard?" "Yes," said the mother. "In the refrigerator -- even when we close the door and the light goes out?" "Yes," said the mother. "Even in the sugar bowl?" the lad asked as he took the lid off. "Yes," said the mother, "even in the sugar bowl." The boy slammed down the lid and said, "Now I've got him."

When I first gave my heart to Christ I remember having a deep yearning to know with certainty beyond any shadow of a doubt that I was saved. I wanted to have the certainty of and confidence that comes with "getting it." One of the first Bible verses that I memorized was John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but will have eternal life." For me that verse offered a very simple and reliable formula: God loved. God sent his Son. I believed in his Son. I was guaranteed not to perish. I could count on eternal life.

There is a lot of "I" in that formula and a lot has happened in the intervening years and all that has happened has perhaps given me the grace to look at this story of Nicodemus with more seasoned eyes and to savor the richness of what is being communicated here. There is much more than any formula going on in this conversation. Jesus is talking to Nicodemus about spiritual awareness.

I recently read this observation, "Seeing with your spiritual awareness is a lot like learning to see in the dark. At first everything seems totally black. But if you are patient and don't grab for the flashlight, little by little you begin to discover that you can pick out shadows and shapes, and in some mysterious way "see."¹ I want to suggest that we look at this conversation between Nicodemus as a lesson in learning to see in the dark with spiritual awareness.

It was a night time meeting, discrete, private, away from the crowds that hovered around Jesus during the day.. It was a safe place to ask a question, to have a stimulating conversation about the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven with one who appeared to know. But Nicodemus was used to being in charge. He was accustomed to being in control so when he came to, he did not bring a question. Instead, Nicodemus brought his own analysis of who he had observed Jesus to be.

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault in Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening page 16.

After all, Nicodemus was a somebody – a Pharisee, a religious leader, a teacher of Israel – he came to Jesus. Notice that he uses the editorial “we.” We have seen your miracles, your signs and wonders, and I know that you are from God. I know who you are.”

And Jesus answered him, “No, you haven’t a clue. You saw me supply wine for the wedding feast. You saw me cleanse the Temple of those who were making a business there and you think you can use this evidence to draw logical, rational conclusions. If this is your profession of faith, you know nothing of faith. Faith is about commitment and risk. Faith is about surrender and letting go and willingness to receive. Your slipping over here in the dark of night in order to tell me that you have figured out who I am is not faith..”

Nicodemus made a statement, and Jesus launched into a rebuttal. Interesting. Then Nicodemus did ask a question, “How? How can this happen? How can these things be?” And Jesus answered these “how to” questions with a story of birth. Interesting conversation. Nicodemus came to Jesus because he believed that Jesus knew the answers. What he did not realize is that he did not know what the questions were. Nicodemus wanted to know how to win the prize, how to achieve the life that for him, even with all that he had achieved, was just beyond his grasp. He thought Jesus could give him that final tip to get him to the pinnacle where he could be in the presence of God. Jesus recognized far more about Nicodemus than Nicodemus revealed. He recognized his searching, and Jesus answered the questions that Nicodemus didn’t even know how to ask.

Jesus knew that the “how to” questions were only on the surface. It was not mere curiosity that had compelled Nicodemus to come to Jesus by night. Deeper questions were haunting him, more along the lines of “who am I?” “why was I born?” “does my life really make any difference to anyone?” “where do I belong?” “how can I be at peace with myself and others?” But Nicodemus didn’t know how to ask those questions. The only questions that he knew how to ask were about balancing the ledger, questions that reflect the assumption that only when things add up can they then be true. Jesus did not deal with those questions. Instead, Jesus told Nicodemus the story of a birth, a story of being born in the Spirit.

But Nicodemus was confused. Nicodemus wanted to line up proofs and arguments in order to arrive at a clear conclusion and thereby be comfortable and secure as a believer. He assumed that this was how faith was born and sustained. So he had no ears to hear Jesus story of being born in the spirit. It was completely incomprehensible to him. Jesus told Nicodemus that faith is born of the Spirit, a Spirit that blows like the wind. The Spirit cannot be controlled or manipulated by us any more than the wind can be controlled by us. Jesus is saying that life in God’s kingdom cannot be earned or achieved any more than anyone has ever controlled their own birth. One is simply born into God’s kingdom and to live in the Spirit means letting go of and letting God, a very nice

slogan, but a principle that strikes fear into every human heart, the older we are, the greater the temptation to fear.

If you find this confusing you are in good company, so did Nicodemus. Like so many of us religious types he was much more comfortable trusting in his own sense of being right, his own sense of moral behavior. But Jesus told Nicodemus that being born in the Spirit meant allowing the Spirit to propel him along leaving behind his old securities. It meant, more than anything else trusting in God's love for him that can never be separated from God's love for all peoples. This is not an easier, softer way. Jesus never made the law easier, never lowered the passing grade, never invited any kind of permissiveness. Our temptation is always to define the law in such a way that we are in and others more suspect are out, but the wind has a way of ignoring all our categories and all our boundaries.

Nicodemus asked how to be born anew, assuming he needed to do something in order to make this happen. Jesus response is, "This is not about what you do. You do not give birth to yourself. You cannot give birth to yourself. God is the one who breathes life into you and gives you birth from above. At you birth, blood is shed but it is not your blood. The blood at your birth belongs to the one who gives birth to you. It belongs to the God through whom you are born into life eternal. Nicodemus asked Jesus "how to" questions and Jesus told him about the God who loves us so much that he shed blood to give birth to us. I think that Jesus knew that this would all seem very shaky to Nicodemus. After all, who would ever expect a new born to appreciate all that had gone into his or her birth? What is asked of Nicodemus and what is asked of us is to take the risk to trust in the Spirit. The promise is that as we do trust we will find ourselves living eternally, living in the reality of God's presence no matter how wild the ride, and it can get wild.

It seems to me that we are not so different from Nicodemus. We proclaim who God is and ask God to make things right for us. Our prayers for ourselves and others go on and on and on. We are so much like Nicodemus. And in the midst of our struggling to figure out how to win God's favor, God is giving us birth, laboring over us, breathing life into us, pushing us out into a life lived in God's presence, an eternal life. We struggle for the prize not recognizing that the prize is already ours.

The accounting line is: If you believe in Jesus, you will have eternal life.
The birth story is: God so loves you that God gives you life.

It is not our believing which gives us birth from above. It is the Spirit of God who births us into life eternal. Nicodemus asked "How to" and Jesus told him a birth story, a story of God bringing into existence things that did not yet exist.

When Nicodemus began to allow himself to be born of the wind, things changed

for him. In the chapters which follow, we read that Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus in the darkness of night, later spoke up for Jesus at great personal risk, publicly questioning those in authority who would judge Jesus. Then after Jesus' death on the cross when all the disciples had fled, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus came forward to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus was no longer intimidated or afraid. Nicodemus had come to realize that he was born from above not by his own doing but by the love of God who birthed him anew and gave him a life of confident hope and love.

What would it mean for us to understand that we are born of the Spirit? Most of us think of ourselves as adults who know our own minds. We know who God is, have a pretty good idea of who God calls us to be and what God wants us to do. What if we were to stop telling God what we think we know? What if we were to admit that God is bigger than our beliefs. What if we were to listen for God's Word to sweep over us without direction from us? What if we did not hold back but allowed the wind to take us to places not on our agenda? What would happen to us if we listened for God to call forth from us that which we did not recognize as being possible? Throughout my life I have had people call forth from me gifts which I did not recognize as being mine to give. I am certain my experience is not unique. Someone names a gift in you as if it existed and as you live into their expectation, you experience the reality of such a gift. God calls into existence things that do not yet exist. God calls forth life which we cannot bring about on our own. What might God be calling forth from us now? Can we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to the untamed wind of God? Can we listen for what we have up to now been unwilling to hear? Can we see in one another not something to critique or judge but rather the image of the God who has given us birth?

The invitation to Nicodemus, the invitation to us, comes as a birth announcement. The invitation is to let go of the ledger. Such an accounting system will be the death of us for there is no way to make our relationship with God balanced. God loved us first and loves us still, calling forth from us a life beyond our imagination. Such life is ours not because we figure out the "How to's" and did the right thing, but because the God who loves us breathes life into us.

To be born of the wind is to trust our life to the God who gives birth to us. To be born of the wind is to embrace the mysterious newness of God knowing we do not have a final hold on the Holy Spirit. To be born of the wind is to live as ones born of love and born to give of ourselves for others in love.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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