

***Basics of the Faith: The Nicodemus in all of Us***  
***John 3:1-16***  
***September 6, 2020***

My guess is that none of us remember the moment we emerged from the dark, cozy womb into the light of the world. We had spent many happy months within our mothers. No wonder we are often screaming our heads off on the birth table. Our mother's womb had nourished and sheltered us for nine months. It had been a quiet, happy life sustained in the womb of our mother. And then in an instant we were thrust into the cold, foreign world that will be our home until we die.

Nicodemus, like many of us, misunderstood Jesus' words about the necessity of being born from above. Nicodemus had been raised within the spiritual traditions of the Pharisees. He had been trained to understand that keeping ritual purity and the Mosaic Law were the gateways to paradise. As a Pharisee he would have followed the rather wooden, legalistic and literalistic interpretation of scripture. He would also, like his brothers in the faith, pay heed to the vast oral tradition, later to be collected as the Mishnah in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Like most Pharisees he would have been conversant with both tradition and with the Torah.

So, it would have been shocking to him to be told by Jesus that in order to see the kingdom of God, he needed to "born from above." After all how much purer or more faithful to the Jewish faith can anyone be than Nicodemus. This phrase "born from above" is often rendered "born again" in many church circles. Jesus is speaking metaphorically, of course, but, as so often happens in the gospels, the recipients of his message regularly misunderstand him.

I would like to suggest today that perhaps there is a Nicodemus within each of us. He struggled, as we do, with this idea of new birth. Like us he can't get his head around the metaphor. Nicodemus says: *we know 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.*

Jesus responds: *Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.* Nicodemus' literal interpretation

of this statement (he says that entering the mother's womb for a second time is impossible) is almost laughable.

Jesus says: *Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Jesus presses the point: Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above'. But what does it mean?*

It fascinates me just how many of us have this tendency to become literalists when we open the bible. For whatever reason when it comes to the bible, we reach for our literalist spectacles. Strangely we reach for a different pair when we read novels, or watch movies and television. Somehow these media fire the right side of our brains while the bible fires the left. With these specs we have no problem with metaphor, simile, or any figure of speech for that matter. Novels and visual media fire our imagination and help us see beyond the literal. So, when Jesus asks Nicodemus to be born from above, we, like him, are confused. Are we wearing the wrong specs? What on earth can he mean?

The phrase "**Born again**", as suggested above, has become a buzzword in certain Christian circles. For the "born again Christians" it means you have ceased to be a non-believer; you have crossed over from the dark side to live in the light as a believer. It signifies a moment of crisis when one makes a decision to become a Christian. In churches that use this phrase comfortably it tends to be a litmus test of being in or out. If yes, according to conservative Christians who feel comfortable with this language, then you have accepted Jesus as your personal saviour, been born again, and guaranteed to be in heaven after you die.

You have moved into a new home in Atlanta, Georgia, and within the first week you have two people at your door. They invite you to the local church; they may even ask, "have you been saved?" Or "are you born again?" This actually happened to an Anglican couple who related their experience in the Globe and Mail several years ago. Even though they didn't attend church they said the best way to end these visits is to say you are an Anglican, or Presbyterian or some other mainline church. Then nobody will bother you again.

For some of us this crisis conversion model was our door into the faith. For others it is outside our experience. For mainline churches this was never a comfortable way to express our journey to faith and conversion. We tend to see it as a gradual process that moves from our baptism as infants right through to our death. Our model for faith is **a journey**. There may be small emotional blips on the heart monitor throughout the journey, but no sudden erratic rise in our blood pressure would be signaled. Or should it happen that one exhibits an exuberant expression of faith in a worship service, emotion no less, the good usher would remind you, “you never learned that here”. Emotion, expressions of excitement are to be reserved to the sports arena; never in church!

It certainly wasn't a sudden awakening for Nicodemus. His journey to faith in Jesus took time. We meet him three times in John's gospel over a number of years. This initial entrance to Jesus is at night. While seeking the truth about Jesus, he is still hedging his bets.

Many people today say they are spiritual but not religious. They mean that they believe in the spiritual dimension of life, even that there is a God who is behind everything, but they remain unimpressed by the institutions of religion. Many people have turned off church and don't believe that they will find answers to their deep questions. Nicodemus is naturally cautious. There have been many other preachers, past and present, who have made the Messiah claim. Nicodemus is curious enough to visit Jesus, but hesitant, just like many folks today. Jesus doesn't condemn his hesitancy. He offers encouragement.

Nicodemus came in the shadows of night. Daytime is too threatening. For many people today entering a church on a Sunday morning is simply too threatening and too scary to contemplate. Not only is there today a prevailing suspicion of religious institutions, but also, they experience our worship as foreign to everything they know. Let's be frank, for the uninitiated we mainliners conduct worship in what must seem to contemporaries under 40, to be in a foreign language. A lot of the music in our hymn books dates back to the 18 and 19 centuries and we follow strange rituals that are alien to a 21st century person.

Let's remember that the only time these folks have been in a church service was for a funeral or wedding. The truth is that our worship

style and language might seem as foreign to them as is the possibility of Martians visiting us. In fact, Marsan visitors might be less alien! There will be seekers who venture into our church services and we trust we will be as inviting, open and non-judgmental as Jesus was toward Nicodemus. But many today will only find their way into the church community at night so to speak. Seekers will find access to our communities through our personal invitation! And possibly through social events, musical concerts, support groups, Alpha, hospitality and other gatherings, they will be introduced to real people who happen to have been born from above. The experience of community, compassion and hope are the doorways for the modern seekers like Nicodemus. For they are seeking community, meaning and purpose in their lives.

Nicodemus appears next in John chapter seven where he speaks up in the court of the Pharisees and chief priests to give Jesus the benefit of a trial before judgment. They quickly silence him by asking if he has suddenly become a Galilean. They remind Nicodemus that scriptures nowhere say Messiah comes from the boonies of Galilee.

Then in chapter 19 after the crucifixion Nicodemus appears with Joseph of Arimathea to take care of the body of Jesus. We are told that Nicodemus brought myrrh and aloes, a hundred pounds, to apply to Jesus' body and prepare it for burial. This was an expensive offering. He appears to have come out of the dark and into the light, to use John's language of conversion. His new birth has taken time. I like to think that he is one of the people who later became part of the Jerusalem church. He has been born from above. And he will continue to be born of water and the spirit in his journey of faith.

This may be your story. It may be describing your journey from unbelief to faith, from skepticism and institutional suspicion to at least a hesitant acceptance of Jesus and his community called church. For there is surely a Nicodemus in all of us.

New birth, then, is a breaking free of unbelief into belief. It is a breaking free and moving out of darkness into the light of the Gospel. It is a breaking free of restricted, judgmental life into abundant life. **As such, spiritual new birth is painful.** Like physical birth it involves leaving behind the past and breaking into the present. Like physical

birth, sometimes it takes longer than we would like, and at other times it comes upon us before we are ready.

It takes Nicodemus a long time to walk into the light of Christ. Jesus invites him into the way. He invites us too. The birth from above propels us into a new way of life, not just a sudden crisis of faith. It is our birth into the journey, not the destination. As we journey remember the foundation under us, behind us, over us, and beside us all the way.

***Amen***