

Church of the Crossroads
Second Sunday in Lent
February 17, 2008
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BORN FROM ABOVE

John 3:1–17

This morning, I invite all of us to see ourselves as Nicodemus. That is what the Gospel writer wants us to do. You know the story. Nicodemus, a teacher of Jewish thought and practice, comes to Jesus at night. It may well be that as a Jewish teacher he was afraid to approach Jesus in the daylight, fearing that he might be seen and then questioned by the Jewish authorities.

He comes to Jesus as a teacher, as one who should have it all figured out. He knows Jewish thought. He knows Jewish practice. His whole reputation as a teacher is tied up with knowing, with being certain. And yet, there is something in Nicodemus that tells him he has not got it all together. Otherwise, he would have not been curious about Jesus. He has a hunch that there is something new to receive and understand. At the same time, Nicodemus is conditioned to rely on what he thinks he knows. Hence his difficulty in understanding what Jesus proceeds to disclose to him.

In so many ways, we are Nicodemus. We have our pet religious understandings, our certain truths, our choice opinions, our favored prejudices. Who can deny it? If we listen to a teacher, we want our positions confirmed rather than challenged. It's only human nature.

Perhaps Nicodemus wanted his positions confirmed by Jesus, this teacher who was gaining a measure of notoriety and following. In any event, Jesus proceeds to disarm Nicodemus through the use of irony.¹ Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel and yet he comes to Jesus. When Jesus speaks of entering the kingdom of God not by moral achievement, but by a transformation wrought by God, which Jesus describes as being born from above, Nicodemus hears it as being “born again,” and literalist that he is, he immediately thinks of re-entering his mother's womb and going through the process of a second birth.

¹ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe*. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999) See 117–125.

To me, it is astounding that so many Christians took hold of the words “born again,” as if this is what Jesus recommended. As a result, all of us (myself included) have been subjected to the question, “Are you a born-again Christian?” and when we fail to answer the question satisfactorily, we must listen to the questioner’s “born again” experience – time, place, and circumstance. This whole business of using this idea of being “born again” as a litmus test of one’s faith is based upon a misreading of the text. Jesus does not invite Nicodemus to be “born again.” He asks him to be “born from above,” which is a very different matter, not a one-time matter, I might add, but something that must take place again and again and again.

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?” Nicodemus asks. “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born again.” Nicodemus, caught up in his literal, prosaic world, simply cannot enter into the world of mystery and poetry. I am reminded of something Marilynne Robinson, the author of the novel *Gilead* has written:

I think there is a profound connection between poetry and theology in Western tradition. Both poetry and theology push conventional definitions and explore perceptions that might be ignored or passed off, but when they are pressed they yield much larger meanings, seem to be part of a much larger system of reality. The assumption behind any theology that I’ve ever been familiar with is that there is a profound beauty in being, simply in itself. Poetry, at least traditionally, has been an educating of the beauty of language, the beauty of experience, the beauty of the working of the mind, and so on.²

In our story, I sense that Jesus wants Nicodemus to leave behind his system of certain morality, his secured beliefs, his prosaic world, and enter into a wild world of poetry and being.

Jesus is not speaking of anything like a literal second birth. He is speaking of being born from above, being born of water (baptism) and the Spirit, which is like the wind. “The wind blows where it chooses, and you

² Marilynne Robinson, “More Than Is Dreamt of in Your Theologies,” in *The Life of Meaning*, ed. by Bob Abernethy and William Bole (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007) 31–32.

hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

The human being who is born of the Spirit does not know exactly where he or she has come from or where he or she is going. Nothing is certain. It is not about certainty; it is about faith and believing. Faith is believing that there is more than meets the eye, that we dare not limit our understanding to that which can be seen and touched and proved, that there is a Spirit that seeks to work through us, a Spirit that comes from God herself. I say “herself” because in the Gospel of John, the Spirit that gives rise to being born from above is surely a feminine image—it involves “birth” and nothing could be more feminine than that. Even here, Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to leave behind his old tired images of God.

So, my friends, whenever you and I think that we have got the spiritual life all figured out; whenever our faith becomes a secure possession, whenever our theology becomes prosaic and mundane, whenever our Christianity becomes conventional and established, we are on the wrong track. We have closed ourselves off to the way the Spirit seeks to work in us and through us, taking us to new beginnings, to new births and new understandings.

My favorite writers and theologians are those who serve to break open my certain world, my old tried and true formulations. They remind me that faith is not something that can be secured or possessed; that it can only be lived and deepened. If you will bear with me, I would like to share with you an example. In an article “Waltzing with the God of Chaos,” Barbara Brown Taylor, a wonderful preacher and writer, has something to say that could serve as a footnote to the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. After she describes how she has been delving into the areas of cosmology and chaos theory, she writes:

I can’t do God as a person. I think there is an absolute, a divine being so vast, so beyond comprehension that all of the cosmos can be attributed to that deity’s power. And yet, that same deity has care for the individual. So I do believe in a deity, an absolute power who knows me by name and who knows every individual creature by name. But a personal God raises red flags for me, too—that sort of “me and Jesus” attitude in which “He’s going to find me a parking place and be sure I’m not sad.” The personal God somehow seems like a personal

valet to me.

In a lot of ways, to read science is to be tempted to become a deist—to believe in a clock-maker God who sets things in motion and wishes the creatures luck. But I’m a Christian, which means I’m schooled in paradox. I’m schooled in the opposite of any truth being another great truth. And so I live in the paradox of this God who seems to have set things in motion and yet is still involved. There’s some evidence that things are random to a point, and yet, I have experience of some spirit that seems to direct my feet at times. So I’m stuck with both of those, and I’ve somehow got to live into the paradox of that. They may not fit together, but I’m stuck with the two.

And there are days when God is definitely busy somewhere else and doesn’t have time for me, so that’s another part of the experience. And somehow, again, reading all this cosmology has increased my reverence. If anything, we’re in a period, I think, in Christianity, where the personal God has gotten far too personal. There’s a shortage of reverence around. I mean T-shirts with the crucified Christ on them and coffee cups with Jesus’ face and, to me, the lack of reverence in that, the lack of respect for the deity is astounding. Thank goodness God’s never let a portrait be made. But I think it’s time for some backing up, some awe, and maybe a little cosmology would cure a few people of that far-too-cozy image of “me and God.”³

Barbara Brown Taylor writes in the spirit of the Gospel of John and the story of Nicodemus and Jesus. That story, if anything, is a story about the need to break forth from our tired only understandings, to enter into the life of being, and Spirit, and paradox.

Was there any hope for Nicodemus? Could he, a teacher of Israel, allow himself to enter into this new understanding he had received from Jesus? Could he begin to believe in the gift of eternal life that was being offered to him in Jesus, the loving gift of God given out of a deep abiding love for the world, a gift given to him and to all? The good news is that Nicodemus, following his encounter with Jesus, did, it seems, embark on a

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Waltzing with the God of Chaos,” *Ibid.*, 47–48.

path of believing and discipleship. He shows up twice more in the Gospel, once in chapter 7 when he appeals to the law of Moses to defend Jesus openly and publicly (this time in daylight) to his fellow Pharisees who declare Jesus guilty and dangerous. Later, in Chapter 19, Nicodemus again aligns himself publicly with Jesus by joining Joseph of Arimathea in removing Jesus' body from the cross and burying him with an enormous amount of spices.

There was hope for Nicodemus, and there's also hope for us. Let us never get so stuck in our prosaic religious world that we miss the new thing that God through the Spirit seeks to work in us and through us. Rather, may we always be ready, again and again and again, to be born from above, to be born of the Spirit who seeks to push us along, if we are willing, to new births and understandings. Yes, may it be. Amen.