

Anew from Above

You probably know someone like him. He's a respected leader. A model citizen. An upstanding sort of person who goes by the book and plays by the rules. That's who Nicodemus is. He's a Pharisee. *And* a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jerusalem high court and ruling council.

But lately, all the council members can talk about is what happened in their holy place just last week. Some young rabbi from out in the sticks showed up in the city and dared to drive all the merchants out of the temple and overturn the tables of the moneychangers—right before the Passover festival, yet! And rumor has it that at a wedding in Galilee, he actually changed water into wine!

Well. Nicodemus can't help himself. He *has* to check out this upstart miracle worker who—they say—is called Jesus. Nicodemus absolutely *has* to find out who he is and what he's all about.

But wait. Nicodemus needs to be careful. What if it became public knowledge that he's associating with this radical teacher?

What would his colleagues say? Eyebrows would be raised, that's for sure. It could cost him his seat on the council. Not to mention his standing in the community. After all, he has his position to consider. He can't just visit Jesus in broad daylight. No. It has to be done under the cover of darkness.

In your mind, envision the two of them sitting down together in the house where Jesus is staying. Nicodemus starts out confidently. Almost arrogantly. Like a man accustomed—as he is—to being in the know about matters of faith. He leads not with a question, but with a statement. Picture him studying the face of Jesus as lamplight plays upon it. For this conversation takes place in the middle of the night.

In the Gospel of John, night represents a time of confusion, a time of misunderstanding. So we're not surprised to learn that this night visitor misunderstands the words of Jesus. That Nicodemus responds to Jesus by asking: *How in the world can an adult who's already grown get back into the mother's womb and be born a second time?*

The thing is, Nicodemus interprets on a physical level what Jesus has said on a spiritual level. And it's this: *Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born*

anew from above. Now maybe the version of Scripture with which you're most familiar reads: *You must be born from above.* Or maybe it reads: *You must be born again or anew.*

But it's important for us to understand that in the original language in which the Gospel was written, the birthing word used here actually carries a double meaning. The Greek word connotes *both* being born from above *and* being born anew or again. But because in English, there's no expression that conveys both senses of the word, most translations of the Bible include only *one* of these two meanings.

Now if you're still awake, you may be wondering why the preacher is rabbiting on about the nuances of scriptural translation. But please stay with me here. It's not possible to be born from above without *also* being born anew. We're born again *through* being born from above. If we focus on simply being "born again," we don't catch Jesus' meaning in all of its fullness.

Has anyone ever asked you if you were "born again"? The context of these two words, in some Christian communities, seems to suggest that being born again is a personal, private experience—one that believers have the ability to initiate. And even to control.

But you and I know the truth. This rebirth about which Jesus speaks to Nicodemus—about which Jesus is speaking to us today—does not come to pass through our own efforts. This new life comes to us through the grace of God. The initiative and the invitation are always God’s. And they come in ways that we can’t anticipate, much less manipulate.

For Jesus tells Nicodemus—and tells us—that to enter God’s reign, we must be born of water, the water of a womb. *And* we must be Spirit-born. This *anew from above* birth is a Spirit birth.

Spirit. In the original Gospel, Jesus is engaging in some word-play. Because the same word means not only *spirit*, but also *wind*. The Holy Spirit, like the wind, “blows where it chooses,” wild and free. We can’t catch or pin down or tame the Spirit any more than we can the wind. We don’t know where the wind comes from or where it’s bound. And it’s the same with the Spirit. But one thing we *do* know: this vital, vibrant, enlivening Spirit that breezes and dances into our everyday routine—this Spirit is of God. New life in the Spirit comes from above.

And this being born again from above is not the goal, not the *end-product* of a life of faith, but rather its beginning. Your

journey and mine start in baptism by water and the Spirit—God’s sign-act of being birthed into new life. A new life of trusting relationship and intimate communion.

With the psalmist, we lift up our eyes, filled with the knowledge that the Holy One above neither slumbers nor sleeps, but protects and cares for us in all the seasons of our lives. This Keeper guards your life from the time before you’re born until you’re gathered back into the everlasting arms. Keeps your coming into this world and your going out of it.

The One who keeps you has sent a Son, the Son who descended from heaven and then was lifted high on a cross. Through his being lifted up on that cross, you are born from above, born anew. By the measureless grace of Jesus Christ, who offers an assurance very full of comfort: *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

God’s purpose is not to condemn the world! This truth is really quite astonishing, don’t you think? Looking down at this world from on high, how could anyone possibly conclude that it’s not deserving of condemnation?

God has charged us with stewardship of the earth. God has charged us with care for the earth. But instead, fallen human beings pollute its air and water. Strip the earth of its resources. Erase from existence whole species of the good creation. And God has called us to love the neighbor. But, driven by greed and lust for power, people grasp the lion's share of the world's wealth. Exploit and oppress those in need. Ignore the cries of suffering brothers and sisters. Violently attack and wage war on and destroy one another. If you were God, wouldn't you send someone to condemn the world? Wouldn't you just wash your hands of humanity and start all over?

But the God we worship and serve didn't do that. This God of unfailing mercy *isn't* doing that. And *won't* do that. Thanks be to God! For even though God's human creatures may be dead in trespasses, *God brings life to the dead*, as Paul affirms in his letter to believers in Rome. Out of death, God brings life. New life from above, a gift to you and me which comes wrapped in a love that is beyond the farthest reaches of our imaginings.

For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Is this not the heart of the Gospel? Is this not

the essence of the good news? This beloved Scripture reveals not only the way in which God loves, but also *how much* God loves.

Many of us here today are parents. Some of us here today are the parents of an only daughter or an only son. Whether your child is a young person or a mature adult, I invite you to consider—just for a moment—how much you love that son or that daughter. It's possible that you can't even find words to express that kind of love. Now after reflecting on *your* love, think about *God's* love for God's precious only Son. Contemplate the cost of giving that Son so that the world might be saved and live. Ponder, if you can, the breadth and the length and the height and the depth of a love that gives an only Son. A self-giving love that brings a new kind of life to you and me.

A life that begins with being born anew from above. This second birth, I feel sure, took place in the life of Nicodemus. When he first comes to Jesus—by night—Nicodemus has a rather limited view of the world. He takes Jesus' words in their most literal sense. But later in the Gospel narrative, Nicodemus appears again. And we see a man whose understanding is being shaped and deepened by the new birth taking place within him. We see him confronting council members who would condemn

Jesus without a hearing. Nicodemus, no longer preoccupied with position and status, grows into freeing, risk-taking discipleship—just the kind of discipleship to which you and I are called—discipleship that springs from encountering the One in whom Nicodemus has been born anew from above. So that when we meet him for the third and final time—not at night but in the light of day—he is fearlessly and lovingly preparing for burial the body of the crucified One whose true identity he has come at last to understand.

This understanding of who Jesus is comes from being born anew from above. It changes Nicodemus. And it changes you and me. It signals a seismic shift in who you are. In how you see yourself. In how you see others. In how you see the world. This transformation comes through the self-emptying, sacrificial love of the One who was lifted up on a cross. Through this love, you're promised a fresh start. A second chance. Through this love, you're born with new eyes to see in your midst the kingdom of God. Through this love, you're born anew from above. Through this love, you're born into new life that has no end!

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