

“Born Again, Again”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 23, 2022

3rd Sunday of Epiphany

Rev. John Wahl

John 3:1-21

“Have you been saved from your sins? Can you tell me the day when you were born again?”

These questions were posed to the 20-year-old me, sitting in the window seat of a train, traveling somewhere through Europe. The one asking the question, having sat down in the empty seat next to me, was a burly man wearing a big cowboy hat who, I guessed correctly, was from Texas, and was overseas on a mission to save souls.

Having grown up in the Bible belt, I was not altogether surprised – even if a little annoyed – to hear this question. It is interesting, really, that this phrase we encounter in today’s reading, “born again,” has become Christian-speak for being saved, for accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. Interesting that so many people use this phrase to imply a single, dramatic conversion moment. Because it comes from this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus: a man who, most certainly, did not have a dramatic conversion moment.

Because we are still relatively early in John’s gospel, it’s not hard to recount the plot thus far. After being heralded by John the Baptist and calling his first disciples. Jesus has essentially done two things. The first is to turn water into wine in what appears to be an impromptu miracle; or rather, a *sign* of God’s activity in the world and disclosure of the identity of Jesus. At the Cana wedding, Jesus enacts the abundance of God’s grace – providing a vast quantity of exceptional wine when the banquet has run dry – that John had foreshadowed in the gospel’s prelude by telling us that, through Jesus, “we have all received grace upon grace.” (1:16)

The second thing Jesus does seems utterly different. Rather than continue his ministry with another sign of abundance, he instead enters into the Temple at the time of the Passover and drives out the animal sellers and moneychangers. But while it may contrast in character from changing water into wine, Jesus’ cleansing of the temple flows from the same reality.

Because God *has* bestowed the fullness of God’s grace onto the world through the Son – the one John called “the lamb of God to take away the sin of the

world” – there is no need for any other sacrifice. The economy of selling and buying of sacrificial animals fails to account for what God is doing and risks altogether missing the meaning of the incarnation.

Actually, these aren't the only things Jesus does; just the only two that John describes in detail, telling his readers that Jesus stayed in Jerusalem during the Passover and performed many other signs and that these signs caused many to believe in him.

It is in this context, then, that Nicodemus comes to see Jesus. John tells us that he is a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews and is curious about Jesus. Little wonder. Jesus has caused quite a stir in Jerusalem. His disruptive behavior at the Temple would have been unheard of; yet, his signs, as Nicodemus confesses, testify that he has come from God.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night. Some believe this was because Pharisees, like Nicodemus, did their bible study at night. Others think it was because a man in his position and status would be afraid of being seen with Jesus. Still others say that it's because, in John's gospel, the darkness is usually a metaphor for confusion or ignorance.¹ But, Nicodemus is curious, he wants to know more. And so, he comes to question Jesus; to learn more about him and – we gather – to make some decision about him.

This, as we'll see, is no small matter in the Fourth Gospel. John's story plays out as a series of encounters between Jesus and various characters in the story, each of whom is called to decide about, and react to, Jesus. They each respond in vastly different ways; almost as if John offers us a variety of options as to who Jesus is; until leading us, finally, to the faithful one at the close of the story – Thomas, ironically known for his doubt – who believes in Jesus.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born anew. The Greek term used here can mean “born again” or “born from above.” It seems pretty clear that Nicodemus takes it to mean “born again;” asking, “It's impossible to enter the mother's womb a second time and be born, isn't it?” Jesus, on the other hand, means “born from above” not a second physical birth, but being born of water and the Spirit.²

Jesus uses this ambiguous word to bridge his identity and his invitation to Nicodemus. Since the beginning of the gospel, we have seen that Jesus – originally from God, born from above – underwent a second birth: a physical incarnation.

¹ Mary Luti, “Now You Can Begin”

² Joana Harader, “Nicodemus”

The invitation to Nicodemus flips the script: in order to be born from above, Nicodemus must be born again. But this second, spiritual birth contrasts from the physical birth Nicodemus already experienced.

Nicodemus misses this invitation, for now, because he takes Jesus' words literally. Jesus offers him a word picture, explaining that "God's Spirit," like the wind, "blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going." The wind is felt, it is experienced. Jesus is saying that even if you can't understand a second birth by the Spirit, from above, come and experience it. Jesus invites Nicodemus to let go of cognitive certainty and, instead, lean into inexplicable experience.³

Nicodemus' response here is a helpless one: he says "how can these things be?" After this, he disappears – decided or undecided about Jesus' true identity we do not know – while Jesus continues to speak; addressing no longer a single person, but a larger, unseen audience. Here, we – as part of this wider audience – hear about God's love for the world; God's gift of a Son, a savior, and the abundance of grace offered for us to know and experience.

Nicodemus will reappear a few chapters later, advocating among his peers (who are trying to arrest Jesus) to, at least, give Jesus a fair trial. He comes on the scene once more, a full three years later, identified as "the one who at first came to Jesus at night," and joins with Joseph of Arimathea in giving the crucified Jesus an honorable burial. We are left to wonder what he ultimately decided about who Jesus was, whether he ever openly professed to having been born again, whether he had been saved. We aren't told; but I'd like to think that, based on his actions, he was moving out of the darkness and into the light.

I know some people do have radical conversion experiences; there are people who hear the voice of Jesus and instantly leave their boats to become followers; who attend a revival and, after praying the sinner's prayer, never turn back; there are alcoholics who find Jesus and instantly quit drinking; thieves who get saved and give back all the money they have stolen. There are any number of Hollywood-worthy stories about being "born again."

But there are also a lot of people more like Nicodemus; who are curious; who want to ask questions and need time to wonder about the answers, maybe thinking too literally at first, until experiencing the blowing of the Spirit wherever it may. There are some of us who, after many years of knowing Jesus, still aren't

³ Lindsey Jodrey from *WorkingPreacher.com*

sure exactly what we think about him; we don't know exactly how to describe what it is we believe.

But if John's gospel – and this story of Nicodemus – is to teach us anything, maybe it should be the lesson that it's okay to wonder, “how can these things be?” This Pharisee came to Jesus, so certain about what he knew. But, quickly, Jesus reminded him of all that he did not understand; including, what it means to feel the Spirit move, and to experience God's abundant grace.

Nicodemus lives in everyone who has ever come up against the limits of knowledge and reason: in despair over the human condition, in the futility of our efforts to control and change the world, in the destruction of a dream or relationship, in the panic that no-one will love us, in the failure to find answer to a prayer. Nicodemus live in all who come to the end of convictions and assumptions, wisdom or skill, courage or self-confidence; in everyone who has ever hung their head in surrender or thrown up our hands in defeat; who have ever just stood there waiting to hear a voice speak out of the silence to redeem or reassure us.

Nicodemus reminds us that even the best-educated, privileged, and well-positioned among us are still searching; that we don't fully understand. He lives in all of us who ask that question, “how can these things be?” and, yet, begin again each new day looking to be born from above – to be born again, again – and to experience the movement of the Spirit in this world that God so loved that God sent a beloved Son; and not to condemn, but to save.⁴

As we inhabit our neighborhoods and communities this week, engaging in conversations and journeying alongside all sorts of characters, may we remember the example of Nicodemus; that although he, at first, did not know nearly as much as he presumed, he allowed himself to be engaged in a life-long process of learning how to respond to who this Jesus truly was; and that to know Christ was to experience his abundance and grace. Amen.

Let us pray:

Loving God, you gave us new life when we were born of water and the Spirit. Refresh and renew us today that we might live into that new life of abundance and grace. Amen.

⁴ Anna Carter Florence from *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 2