

Nick's Journey

^{NRS} **Isaiah 6:1** In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" ⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

^{NRS} **John 3:1** Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that 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." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you 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."

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Sometimes it's difficult to really hear a passage of scripture clearly. That can be because the text is so tied to the culture and times in which it was written - that today we have a hard time relating to what it meant. Another source of difficulty can be that over time tradition has built up around the text to the point that it obscures the heart of the passage. That sort of thing has happened with today's gospel lesson. Back in the 1960s and 70s, there was a lot of talk about being "born again." Some people declared that you weren't really a Christian if you hadn't been "born again." You might be under the wrong impression that you were a Christian, but, in fact, after you died, things were going to be hot as Hell, if you weren't "born again." Folks said that was obvious because Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3 KJV) People would point out how Paul had an overwhelming experience of the Holy Spirit on the road to Damascus, how the disciples dropped everything and immediately went to follow Jesus when he called them, and they might use today's Old Testament text about Isaiah's vision of God as another example of how one was supposed to have a sudden ecstatic experience of God's claim on your life. "This," they said, "is what it means to be 'born again.'" That's understandable, because being born is a sudden and traumatic experience. We don't say that a baby was born from 6:15 to 6:47. No, we say the baby was born at 6:47.

This morning we need to go back and take a fresh look at this story about Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus was a devout man, a Pharisee and he's a man of some prominence, a leader, we're told. One night, he came and began the visit by complimenting and praising Jesus. "Rabbi, we know that 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." Rabbi is a term of respect for a teacher, somewhat like "professor." We know that you come from God. We know that God is with you. The signs, and wonders, that you do prove it.

Jesus replied, "Nobody sees the kingdom of God unless they're reborn." The reply by Jesus sounds like a sudden shift in the conversation, but it isn't. Jesus corrected Nicodemus. Nicodemus had said essentially that we see God in you because of the miracles you perform. But just a few verses earlier, in chapter two, we read that many people in Jerusalem believed in Jesus because of his signs, but that didn't make them worthy of his trust. Some people will be impressed by anything that seems magical, whether it's a charlatan performing some bit of trickery or a divine miracle. Either way, they're likely to think God is involved, just because they don't understand it. Nick said, "Your signs are an indication of the presence of God! Jesus said, "No, if you really want to see God's realm, you must be reborn. No one can see the kingdom of God without being reborn."

We need to unpack this statement. First of all, the verb "see" is in the present tense. It does not say no one will see heaven without being reborn. Jesus is not talking about the future, but the present. This "seeing" takes place now. You can't see the kingdom of God, right here, right now, if you haven't been reborn. This passage has an important play on words, easily seen in the Greek, but often obscured in translation into English. Much of the passage hinges on a single Greek word, *anōthen*, which can be translated as "again" or "from above." Jesus said that the kingdom of God is invisible to you unless you have been born *anōthen*.

Nicodemus heard this as born again. He understood Jesus to be speaking in a literal way, but it doesn't make any sense and Nicodemus says so. "Can somebody return to their mother's womb and be born again? He's incredulous! Jesus replied, "Don't be astonished. I'm talking about spiritual birth. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of the spirit is spirit. I'm not speaking literally, but symbolically; this isn't about being physically born again, but about being born from above, born spiritually."

We sometimes say that after some major failure in life, somebody reinvents themselves and moves on to successfully cope with life in a new way. That's a bit like what Jesus is telling Nicodemus. Nicodemus needs a spiritual birth, a spiritual awakening. We all do. By being spiritually awake, we have new eyes to see the kingdom of God. What does it mean to be spiritually awake?

To succeed in life, we were encouraged by our parents to work hard, to aim to get ahead, to be competitive, stand up for ourselves, fight for our rights, be cautious of those who would take advantage of us, save for the future, be strong, the early bird gets the worm, don't sit on your laurels as someone will run past you, and you need to have motivation, drive and ambition. These attributes generally serve us well in the realm of today's culture and society.

The apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Galatia and told them, "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Gal 5:22-23 NRS) When we are born from above, when we are spiritually awake, when we have a right spirit within us, we have these attributes. And these gifts, these attitudes, give us eyes to see and ears to hear God's realm in our life, right here, right now. In Paul's letter to the disciples in Rome, he told them, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2 NRS) Be transformed. Be born from above.

Jesus went on to talk about the Spirit coming and going like gusts of wind. It's an image of how God's Spirit pursues us, washes over us, and surrounds us. You can't see the gusts of air, but only see the results of their passing by. Perhaps being born from above is something that can only be discerned over time. After all, transformation is a process, not an instant.

It's interesting to note the difference between Jesus and Nicodemus. The two are far apart in their approach to theology and Scripture. One speaks or listens literally - the other speaks and listens in metaphor or figure of speech. Nicodemus goes for the plain, literal meaning of what he has heard. Jesus speaks on the symbolic, non-literal plane.

And so it is, they parted that night, apparently never quite connecting. It seems that they've talked, but not communicated. We might say, they've talked past each other. Only John's gospel

mentions Nicodemus. At this point, we aren't quite sure what to think about him. Is he friend or foe? Is he just too thickheaded or stubborn to hear and accept what Jesus has said? Fortunately, John thinks it is important that we know more about this man.

In chapter seven, we learn that Jesus was teaching in the temple courtyard and the crowd became agitated. Some thought that he was the Messiah - and some didn't. The temple authorities knew that they had to contain this. If it began to look like an uprising, the Romans would quash things in their own heavy handed manner. So, they sent the temple police to arrest Jesus, but the police came back empty handed. They said, "No one has ever taught like this man does." The temple authorities began to berate the police and the crowd both, and things looked like they would get out of hand. At this point, Nicodemus spoke up. "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" (John 7:51 NRS) It's very unpopular to be the voice of reason when tensions and emotions run high. Nicodemus stuck his neck out and he paid for it by being berated as stupid and not being a team player. He had, in public, taken an unpopular position.

We hear about Nicodemus one more time in chapter 19. At this point, Jesus had been crucified. He had died. Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for permission to take the body away. That request was granted. Then, Nicodemus showed up with a hundred pounds of burial spices, an extravagant amount, and together they prepared the body for burial and placed it in an unused grave.

John never tells us what Nicodemus believes – only what he does. It's in his actions that we witness Nick's journey, his journey of faith. The journey began with curiosity which turned to confusion and misunderstanding. When he left the meeting with Jesus that night, he might have felt put down, or bewildered, or filled with new understanding. We don't know. But some time later, Nick was willing to go against the crowd and against his peers to argue for fair treatment under the law for an unpopular troublemaker. There are times when many of us haven't traveled that far along our own journey of faith.

By the time that Jesus was executed, Nick was committed not only to justice, but to generosity. He had no obligation to care for the body of a convicted troublemaker. He had no responsibility as a family member to do that. His act of burying the body was an act of love and compassion. His gift of the burial spices was an offering of generosity. Nick had come a long way on his faith journey since meeting with Jesus one night. "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation [born from above]; everything old has passed away, everything has become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17–19). Nicodemus can be seen as a work in progress on his way from being intrigued by Jesus - to believing and acting for Jesus.

Nick's journey is instructive for us. We, too, would do well to seek to learn more about Jesus' teachings. It's okay to question and doubt what we hear. It's how we learn. We will face times when our faith will call for us to speak an unpopular message. And we will need to do hard things and do them with compassion and generosity. These are all part of the journey. Like Isaiah, we will hear God's voice asking, whom shall I send? Pray that you will answer like Isaiah did, "Here am I, Send me." Amen.

Colossians 3:12-14 NRS ¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.