

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The story of Nicodemus is one of the most familiar of all the narratives in John's account. This man is one of a number of individuals who appear in the fourth gospel as *prospective* disciples, but in his case we need to abandon the notion that all who come into contact with Jesus develop into faithful followers. St. John tells us of a number of people who do not turn out to be "resolutely faithful disciples." Which makes Nicodemus all the more interesting. He appeals to us because he "has color and depth, questions and problems." He is complicated. He is much like us. And that is why the story continues to speak to so many people.

We see ourselves in Nicodemus. We see his doubts, his uncertainty, his faltering, his questing but not – at least immediately – succeeding, and we are reminded of our own spiritual search and how it has often not achieved the goal we had in mind in undertaking the journey.

If we read this passage carefully, we will note that Nicodemus, after having an extended discussion of how one can discern the kingdom of God, simply disappears from the passage. His response to the offer of a new life is "resistant amazement, consternation, and confusion." He is not a person who is easily convinced or readily willing to follow. Jesus goes on expounding, but the original questioner is now gone from the scene.

And yet, we also know that Nicodemus re-appears in John's gospel: in chapter 7 as one who argued in favor of Jesus' right to a fair hearing, and again in chapter 19, honoring Jesus with a respectable burial. That's all of the new information we gather at this later point because no explanation is offered, but these later events are extremely revealing. If we thought that the words of Jesus had not succeeded in convincing Nicodemus of the need to be "born from above," he returns at the most poignant and compelling moment in the life of Jesus to pay tribute and to honor this teacher who appears to have convinced Nicodemus that the teacher was *of God* in a very direct way and whose word was therefore to be taken seriously.

So, again, perhaps we like this story because we see ourselves in it. We do not "jump into discipleship without a lot of wavering and caution.

Jesus encounters these people individually and addresses each personally. They respond honestly and realistically," but in the end they don't all wind up "on board." John offers us a range of examples of people making up their minds about Jesus, some agreeing to follow him, others opting out.

Nicodemus is a "leader of the Jews," presumably a literate, thoughtful, righteous man who has done a lot of soul-searching before he ever encounters Jesus. He is also a member of the religious party "most opposed to the teaching of Jesus." But he "seeks Jesus out." He approaches him politely and sincerely. He comes at night which suggests a need for secrecy.

The night-time meeting also reveals the condition of his soul. He is living in the dark but seeking the light. He is direct but polite, as if he were addressing a rabbi “in God’s service.” Which tells us something about the sincerity of his search for wisdom.

In John’s gospel we are confronted with a rich palette of symbols and metaphors. For example, when Jesus talks about being born of water and the spirit, the use of the word water may be an effort to recall the water which accompanies the birth of human infants. It also reminds us of Jesus’ own emergence from the Jordan and receiving God’s blessing at his baptism, the purification jars being filled with water which was turned to wine at Cana, or the discussion about “living water” with the Samaritan woman at the well (a story which occurs later in this passage).

And it recalls the exodus when God’s people were delivered at the Red Sea.

And a *second* birth is a powerful depiction of a significant boundary marker, one which recalls moments when people have set out on new and treacherous journeys, called by God to make themselves in a new image: Abraham, for example, setting out on a journey to a place he had never known by a path he had never followed. All on the basis of faith alone.

And the passage specifically recalls Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai to find his people in rebellion and as a result being punished by poisonous snakes invading the camp.” In Judaism snakes symbolized evil...a strong negative force;”

Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole for people to look at and live, to “turn away from death to life.” So Jesus will also be lifted up on the cross which resembles the pole upon which the serpent was displayed to the followers of Moses. And his resurrection will bring new life to the world.

What the author of John’s gospel was saying was that “the evil which was and is in the world...was somehow allowed to take out its full force on Jesus. When we look at him hanging on the cross (or ‘lifted up’)...what we are looking at is the result of the evil in which we are all stuck. *And we are seeing what God has done about it.*”

To speak of being *born from above* or *born again* would have had special meaning for any first century audience, because the topic was birth itself. At that time, “birth status was the single, all-important factor in determining a person’s honor rating. Ascribed honor, the honor derived from one’s status at birth, was simply a given. It...stayed with a person for life.”

To be born *over again*, born for a second time, however unthinkable that event might be, would alter one’s ascribed status in a very fundamental way. A new ascribed honor status would...be a life-changing event of staggering proportions.”

In Greek, the term used here underscored the newness of which Jesus was speaking, a newness which “cannot be contained or comprehended by any simple or pre-existent categories”....and which “challenges even the conventional capacity of language” to convey its full meaning.

The imagination of Nicodemus was clearly not ready to embrace the newness of birth of which Jesus spoke.

In Judaism, both Nicodemus and Jesus knew how important it was to be born into the right family. But “what mattered most (to devout Jews) was being *a child of Abraham*. Of course, other things mattered too, but this was basic. Now, Jesus is saying, God is starting a new family in which this ordinary birth is not enough. You need to be born again, born from above. But no matter how it was phrased, “the initiative for this....remain(ed) God’s.”

“Water and spirit” here must mean the double baptism: baptism in water, which brings people into the kingdom-movement begun by John the Baptist and continued by Jesus’ disciples....in “new life, *bubbling up from within*, that Jesus offers, which is “the main thing this (entire) gospel account is about.”

Today’s appointed gospel reading also includes perhaps the most famous of all verses in the New Testament: John 3: 16: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*” On one level, it is a lovely summary of the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. But on another level, it can and has been used to justify “damnation for unbelievers.” The problem with this latter interpretation is that it ignores verse 17, the one that immediately follows that more famous verse 16: “*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*” Verse 17 clearly states that “the incarnation, life, death and exaltation of Christ are all rooted in the love of God.”

Thus, a theology which emphasizes God’s outpouring of punishment on Jesus in our behalf, is not only not found anywhere in John’s gospel but in fact expresses the opposite of what verse 17 so clearly says. Thus, an interpretation which emphasizes punishment and judgment and *exclusion* is a fundamental misunderstanding of St. John’s intent in expressing it in this way.

Additionally, we misread verse 16 if we emphasize merely the full extent of God’s love---- in other words, God loved the world so much.... when the actual meaning is “God loved the world in this way...” And when expressed in this manner, the verse takes on a quite different tone.

And, again, what both verses are saying is that God loves Nicodemus, he loves a Samaritan woman at the well, he loves a man paralyzed his entire life and the friend of Jesus dead in the tomb for four days. God loves Peter who denies his discipleship. This is not about exclusion. It is about the abundance of God’s love for his created order.

“The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you...So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.’”

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Amen.

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