

## Called In To Question

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John 3:1-17

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### I.

In today's gospel story, Nicodemus, a learned man, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, comes to Jesus in the dead of night. We do not know exactly why he came.

We do know what he said to 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." Still, we wonder what Nicodemus' primary motivation was for coming and we wonder why he did so in the privacy of darkness.

Did Nicodemus want to make a sort of confession? "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God." And did he come at night for fear of being discovered as one who held Jesus in high esteem?

Or did Nicodemus sense something irresistible in Jesus' person, what he calls "the presence of God"? And did he come at night because it was the only way he could be alone with that irresistible presence?

Or did Nicodemus come to the Rabbi, the teacher who has come from God, to learn something. And if Nicodemus came to learn something from Jesus, why his opening line a statement rather than a question?

As a student at Harvard Divinity School, I experienced many a lecture that concluded with a question and answer period. In particular, I remember Cornel West, at that time Professor of the Philosophy of Religion, would end his lectures with, "Questions? Queries?" Perhaps overwhelmed by the intellectual acumen presented in West's lectures, we students found it at times difficult to formulate a question worthy of the content matter. Professor West was always gracious, treating each question as if it were absolutely relevant to the discussion, even when it was not. At times, some student, when called upon, would launch into mini lectures of their own. Run-on sentence, really, and not a questions. Usually, these student had enough knowledge to at least *sound* intelligent. Perhaps they were candidates for doctoral study and were trying to impress the professor

with their ability to process and formulate concepts, as well as to quote from Kant and Schleiermacher and Hegel and to invoke realized eschatology and soteriological underpinnings and the hermeneutical circle. Sometimes it seemed that we, the students, knew enough, but had forgotten how to ask a question.

## II.

Perhaps Nicodemus, the learned teacher, the influential Pharisee, the respected leader, had forgotten how to ask a question. He had been impressed by Jesus, by the signs he had shown, and had formulated an informed opinion of him. So, when he meets Jesus in the secrecy of the night, he shares his prepared statement. He speaks not only on his own behalf, but on behalf of the learned community of which he is a part. But Jesus responds by answering a question Nicodemus did not ask. "I'll tell you the truth," Jesus says, "no one catches a glimpse of the kingdom of God without being born anew," or, in our translation, an equally valid "born from above." In other words, an encounter with Jesus calls into question our assumptions about our ourselves.

An encounter with Jesus calls into question our titles and degrees. An encounter with Jesus calls into question our authority and privilege. An encounter with Jesus calls into question our precious identities - our gender, our sexual orientation, our nationality, our creedal affiliation, our political party, our family ties, our racial biases, even our moral assumptions. An encounter with Jesus calls into question our self-imposed limitation of knowledge that helps us to arrive at settled conclusions. And an encounter with Jesus calls us into a deeper awareness of the presence of God in our life, the authority of Jesus over all other commitments, and the freedom of the spirit of God to blow where it will. An encounter with Jesus keeps our conclusions about ourselves and others in check, and allows us to acknowledge that a new birth is not only possible, but necessary for us to glimpse the kingdom of God made known through Jesus' birth, ministry, death, and resurrection.

## III.

I know that in the context of a theologically liberal, intellectually open, and socially progressive congregation such as ours, today's scripture is regarded as suspect if not worthy of dismissal. From this passage comes, of course, where the "born again" designation against which we so often

define ourselves. We cheer at the bumper sticker that reads, “Born just fine the first time.” We bristle at the born again affirmation that Jesus is God’s son and that belief in him is the one and only way to eternal life. We have experienced some who claim to be born again as self-righteously assured of their own salvation. These folks wear their born again designation like a badge, and are quick to point out that, while anyone can earn a badge like theirs, only the ones with badges will be granted access to the balconies at the big show. Everyone else will be crowded into the orchestra pit.

But are we missing something? Having decided to dismiss this passage, have we given up something that may be key to our own self-understanding? Have we given up something that may be the key to understanding the gift God gives the world in Jesus Christ? Have we given up the bifocals of the Spirit that allow us to see that in Christ we are born of water and the spirit, born of our mothers and born of the spirit, born of the earth and born of heaven, born in blood and somehow, mysteriously, saved by blood, which we rehearse every time we approach the communion table? Have we asked so many questions based in fear and suspicion that we have called in to question the very basis of our belief in anything, including our belief in God? Have our questions become veiled statements about our disbelief, our distrust in the God who saves through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit? If so, what kind of questions should we be asking?

#### IV.

Johathan Sacks, England’s Chief Rabbi, in his book, *Haggadah*, suggests three conditions for asking questions rightly. First, a question asked rightly is motivated by a genuine desire to learn. In other words, a genuine desire to learn promotes questions that can lead us beyond our current prejudices and toward new horizons of understanding. Second, a question asked rightly is accompanied by a readiness to accept the limits of one’s understanding. In other words, when we accept such limits, we are actually wiser in our known ignorance than those who think they have reached the final conclusion. Third, a question asked rightly realizes that, when it comes to the Torah (or, in the case of Christianity, when it comes to the Gospel), one learns by living and doing. In other words, you cannot learn what it means to love God without loving God and loving others in the way that God loves.

You cannot learn what it means to follow Jesus without following him. You cannot learn what it means to allow the Spirit to flow in your life without letting the Spirit flow in your life. You cannot understand scripture without first trusting that it has something to say to your life. You cannot be a member of the church unless you act like a member of the church. You cannot glimpse the kingdom of God unless you are born again and, perhaps, again and again and again.

Keep asking questions rightly and you might get an answer. The good news, church, is that being born again is not the formulaic experience it's been made out to be. Listen to Jesus: "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."

Keep asking questions rightly and you might get an answer. The good news is that our God is not a detached nor a judgmental God. Listen to Jesus: "God not only *loves* the world, but *so* loves the world."

Keep asking questions rightly and you might get an answer. The good news is that being born again is not a badge we earn but a gift we receive. Listen to Jesus: "God gave his only son." Can you think of a gift more precious than a parent's only child? In other words, God gave the equivalent of the most precious thing the human imagination could devise.

Keep asking questions rightly and you might get an answer. The good news is that there is a way out of despair, out of defeat, out of depression and despondency.

There is a way to move out of the darkness of night and into the light of day. There is a way to be born anew, to be born of the spirit even as of water. There is a way that addresses your deepest questions and your grandest hopes. That way is the way of Jesus and for those of us who bear his name, it is the way to glimpse the kingdom of God, it is the way to enter the kingdom of God, it is the way to experience eternal life, and it is offered to the whole world. Listen to Jesus: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

V.

What a gift. What a possibility for the world. What a reason to sing. What an occasion to dance. We are not left alone. We are not left to our own devices.

We are not left with worn out questions or with statements that want to settle it once and for all. The spirit blows where it will. It is free. And through the Spirit, so are we. Free to ask the questions that lead to rebirth. Free to trust in God's love for the world. Free to believe in Jesus' testimony to that love. Free to follow the spirit where it leads us. Free to ask, "How shall I be born anew today?"

When I contemplate that freedom, I can't help but shout for joy. When I truly believe that Jesus is alive in my life, I can't help but sing it. When I trust in God's love for me and for the whole world, I can't help but smile.

And say God, I thank you. I thank you for being a God worthy of *my* love and trust and belief. May I never forget to keep asking the next question. May I never conclude that I've got it all figured out. May I never convince myself that I have stretched my mind far enough to conceive of the furthest limits of your grace. I may come to you at night, and I may come to you during the day. May my ears be open to hear the questions I need to be asking and may my eyes be open so that I, too, might glimpse your kingdom and have eternal life.

Amen.