

“So, are you born again?” Perhaps for you, like me, your response to that question depends a lot on *who* is asking it and *how* it is being asked. It can be asked as an insider question that makes you feel defensive, as in, “so, are you saved like me?” or even “since you worship in TEC, I’m fairly certain you aren’t!” But it can also be asked as an outsider question, by someone who may be a fan of Bill Maher or Christopher Hitchens, someone who is cynical about religion and tends to lump all Christians into one big pile. So maybe an old friend is worried that you are becoming something of a holy roller because you decided to attend a Bible Study this lent, and when they ask, “are you born again?” what they may really be asking is: “are you as crazy as the rest of them?” It’s a loaded question from all sides and context is everything when such a question is asked. For most Episcopalians it feels like a very personal question and not something to be discussed on a public street corner.

Whenever I have been at the receiving end of this question about being born again, I have rarely experienced it as a desire to engage in a serious conversation. Far more often, my experience has been that it is asked as a kind of litmus test by someone who is trying to figure out which box to put me in. When that has happened to me, the old “fight or flight” thing starts to kick in pretty quickly. If that has not been your experience, then count yourself as lucky. But I began where I did for a reason today: because it seems to me that if we mean to hear good news in the third chapter of John, we need to begin with open minds and hearts, and perhaps a fresh set of eyes and ears.

So are you? Born again, I mean? I wonder about Jesus’ tone in today’s gospel reading, because tone is one of the things no gospel writer can convey. Is he trying to embarrass Nicodemus, who is after all, a teacher of Israel and doesn’t seem to be able to follow the theological conversation? Is Jesus dripping with sarcasm and saying something like “you idiot, Nicodemus, you haven’t got a clue!” Or is Jesus having a little fun with Nicodemus, teasing him a little? Something more like: “Nic, are you for real? I mean I know you’ve got that big fancy degree and all, and I’m just a hillbilly from the sticks, but this is the easy stuff, man!” It makes a difference and it’s hard to know for sure. But if I were directing a film of John’s Gospel I’d have the actor playing Jesus try to convey more humor than sarcasm and more engagement than disdain.

Notice that it’s nighttime when Nicodemus comes to Jesus. It’s quite likely that Nicodemus, who is a highly successful and important man, doesn’t want his respectable neighbors to know the company he’s keeping. So he chooses the cover of darkness. Maybe he’s a coward. But maybe he is sincere and curious. He wants to know more. But as a leader of the Jerusalem Council, he has a lot more at stake socially and politically than lepers and tax collectors by coming to this upstart Jewish outsider from the hills of Galilee. Perhaps he comes, not necessarily looking to convert or become a disciple, but even so as spiritually open and curious, aware that the signs that Jesus performs reveal God at work in his life. Maybe he comes as a genuine seeker.

As a pastor, I had more of these encounters as a campus minister than I do as a parish priest. One of my favorite campus ministry stories was with a freshman named Scott, who knocked on my door at Central Connecticut State University one day to explain to me why he was an atheist. He sought me out in the Campus Ministry Office to tell me this! I thought he protested too much, but I admired his desire to engage, and we soon became friends. We talked often about the God he didn’t believe in. I cannot take the credit (or the blame) when I tell you that after graduation he went to Andover Newton Seminary, was ordained in the United Church of Christ, and then did a PhD in Ethics at Princeton and that today he is a tenured professor, teaching undergraduates. When we first met, though, he was something like Nicodemus.

You get that a lot in Campus Ministry. Even so, the most devout people I know are still seekers at some level, throughout the long journey of faith: still questioning and still searching—still open and curious, still asking questions about the true God they want to believe in and the false ones they are learning to let go of.

So Nic comes at night. Within the context of John's Gospel, it's interesting to notice how often John plays with imagery of light and darkness: it is he who refers often to children of light and children of darkness and to Jesus as the Light of the world. So here is good old Nicodemus, coming in the night, drawn to the Light. Surprisingly, however, Jesus seems to respond rather sharply to Nicodemus: *Amen, Amen* (twice for extra dramatic effect!) —“truly, truly, I tell you that no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Notice that Jesus isn't talking here about how you get saved or how you “get to heaven” when you die. He's talking about how the Reign of God breaks into our lives, into this world, among us. He's talking about those moments when we get glimpses of “thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.” All those parables about the Kingdom we find in the synoptic gospels—about lost sheep and lost sons, about mustard seeds and compassionate Samaritans—are about developing eyes to see and ears to hear that the Reign of God is already in our midst. Only too often, we remain too blind to see. The whole point of the Light, I think, is to help us to see. So Jesus seems to be telling Nicodemus that there isn't a simple formula or proof he can offer him: Nicodemus will have to learn to see for himself, if only there is some light.

In order *to see*, Jesus tells Nicodemus, he must be *born*—well, how exactly? The Greek is ambiguous and has three perfectly valid interpretations. It's *anōthen*. So you can say (as the NRSV that we heard today does): “you've got to be born from above.” But if you look that up in a NRSV Bible you'll see a notation at the bottom of the page that says: “or, you must be born anew.” If you prefer the NIV Bible, there you will read, “you've got to be born again.” But there, too, you'll find a little note from the editors that says, “or, you've got to be born from above.” So which is it: from above, anew, or again? “Yes!”

Our friend Nic initially misses the point because he hears “*anōthen*” in a literal way and connects it only to a physical return to the womb, which Jesus says is just plain silly. Jesus speaks in parables and riddles intended to invite further reflection, and this encounter is no exception to that rule. The disciples are constantly being tripped up by this, and so is Nicodemus. So then Jesus responds by saying that what he is really talking about is being “born by water and the spirit.”

We Episcopalians don't tend to talk about being “born again” very often but this more sacramental explanatory language is everywhere for us, especially in the Baptismal liturgy. One reason that we get this reading in the context of Lent is because Lent *is all about Baptism*. In the early church, Lent was the season of preparation, a time to prepare converts to the faith who were then baptized at the Easter Vigil. By water and the spirit we are born *anōthen*: dying with Christ, we are raised with Christ to the new life of grace.

Now we've got *live* into that reality, of course. That's what these forty days are for: for waking up and for changing old destructive patterns and for making new beginnings. We can't simply be passive recipients of God's gifts: we need to respond to what God has done, and is doing, in our lives. So even if we were baptized decades ago, Lent is the time to “wake up” to that claim that God has on our lives by responding

to it and reaffirming it. As we do, we begin to see the world through a very different set of glasses: through the lens of the Baptismal Covenant.

We have been born *anóthen* by water and the spirit. At some level, the Christian journey begins with the recognition that Jesus loves *me*. (This I know, for the Bible tells me so.) We must be still enough to hear the voice of the God who created and formed us saying, really, truly, *you are my beloved*. Those gurgling waters of Baptism are there to remind us that by water and the Spirit we *have* been claimed, and marked, and sealed as Christ's own forever. If you need to go up and touch those waters, this Lent, then do it. Be still enough this Lent to remember that no matter how far you may stray from that reality, you cannot undo God's promise that you are a beloved child of God. You have been born *anóthen*, by water and the Spirit. *But Holy Baptism also means we have been knit together into one Body.*

The journey of faith takes us from "God loves *me*" to "God loves *us*." We are born *anóthen* into a community not of "like minded people," but of diverse members who think and act differently from us. Yet week after week we are called to become One Bread and One Body. Living into this reality can be challenging and difficult work sometimes. It's hard enough here, among people who like different styles of music and have different political opinions, among some who have the most annoying habits. But it's even harder when you look beyond these walls to the wider Church. It can be challenging to remember that Jesus loves *us* when someone is asking if you are born again, and you feel like strangling them. It's hard when committed Christians disagree on important and emotional matters like human sexuality, and war and peace, and the role of government. But Christianity is not a solitary thing: and growth in our faith comes only when we learn to embrace our sister and brother and to see the light of Christ in them. This doesn't mean they are right, or even that everyone is "half-right." But it does mean that we are not exempted from the commandment to "love one another" just because we don't like somebody.

One can spend a lifetime working on that part of faith. But there is a step beyond "God loves us"—and that is the move we see made in the third chapter of John's Gospel: God so loved *the world*. As we open our eyes to that calling to live in response to God's love, we begin to see that God—the Creator of humankind—really does love not just us, but Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and Sikhs and atheists and pagans too. Again, this doesn't mean everyone is the same or everyone is equally right. But it does mean that God's love is much deeper and broader and higher than we usually imagine. And we are called to love like that, with God's help.

A postscript: in the seventh chapter of John's Gospel, when the temple police are reporting back to the chief priests and Pharisees they are asked why they didn't just go ahead and arrest Jesus. An argument ensues and Nicodemus speaks up. "Our law," he says, does not judge people without first giving them a fair hearing." (John 7:50) At which point someone snidely comments: "Where are you from, Nic...Galilee?" And then on Good Friday, in John's telling of that day's events, Nicodemus comes with Joseph of Arimathea to claim the corpse of Jesus. The text says that Joseph, a member of the Council, "was a disciple of Jesus." It doesn't make that claim of Nicodemus. Even so, it does say that he came with Joseph, and that he brought "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds of weight." (John 19:39) Together Nicodemus and Joseph take Jesus' body and bind it with linen cloths and with the spices, following the burial customs of the day.

They do it *in broad daylight*.