

Rebirth

March 20, 2011

Genesis 12:1-4a Psalm 121 John 3:1-17

Does that exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus remind you at all of this?

Abbott: Well, let's see, we have on the bags, Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third...

Costello: That's what I want to find out.

Abbott: I say Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know's on third. ...

Costello: Well then who's on first?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: I mean the fellow's name.

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The guy on first.

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The first baseman.

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The guy playing...

It keeps on going, of course. Abbott knows full well that the very peculiar names of his players are *Who*, *What*, and *I Don't Know* ... and Costello is operating in a universe in which those are questions.

And in the gospel of John, we've got Nicodemus and Jesus. Jesus says, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born ἀνωθεν [a'nothen]" (a word that can mean *from above* or, secondarily, *again*).

Jesus is talking about being born *from above*—in other words, through God.

But Nicodemus is a linear kind of guy, and he hears ἀνωθεν [a'nothen] and assumes *again*. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (Can’t you just hear the sarcasm?)

And to such a linear-minded question, Jesus’ answer makes no sense: “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

Who? What? I Don’t Know!

So what’s going on here? Let’s set the scene.

First of all, it’s nighttime, and in the Gospel of John, nighttime—darkness—always is a time of unbelief, ignorance, and temptation. So we’re set up to be a little suspicious of this Nicodemus who comes by night.

Second, Nicodemus is identified as a Pharisee—the powerful Jewish sect who strongly believed that only by knowing and following all the rules, scrupulously, could a person be saved. He’s one of those guys who (and this is for the men of Musica) “knows a thing or two, and since he knows a thing or two, he thinks he knows it all.”

And then there’s his name. Back in the days when names *meant* something, and parents chose them not because they sounded nice or were popular, this man was given the name Nicodemus. “Conqueror of the People.” With what kinds of expectations was he raised, do you think?

Musing about Nicodemus, a South African pastor by the name of Peter Woods writes about himself that he is a “child of Apartheid.” As a white male growing up during those years in South Africa, he was assured of what was called “*baasskap*” *Afrikaans*—Afrikanns’ “boss-ship.”

My education, social and familial formation [Woods writes] all taught me that I was better than other people and that I would be expected to take a position of leadership in society when I grew up. ... My name should have been Nicodemus.¹

Nicodemus, conqueror of the people. Boss by birthright. So what the heck is this Nation-Conquering Pharisee doing, coming in the night to ask questions of the Suffering Servant, of Jesus?

¹ Peter Woods, “Rebirthing the Powerless Rabbi – Lent 2” in *The Listening Hermit*.
<http://thelisteninghermit.wordpress.com/2011/03/15/rebirthing-the-powerless-rabbi-lent-2/>

It seems that he's come seeking rules, steps to follow in order to *see* (that is, *participate in*) the kingdom of God.

He's not the last person to look for such rules. What do you think self-help books are for? I went to Amazon.com and typed "Christian, steps" in the search field for Books and got 2,151 results, including (on the first screen) *The 12 Steps for Christians*; *10 Basic Steps Toward Christian Maturity*; *Step by Step: Divine Guidance for Ordinary Christians*; and *Five Steps to Christian Growth*. We want rules, preferably twelve or fewer, so we can start marching, start making progress, start checking things off on the list.

And what does Jesus say to that? "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God [—no one can participate in the kingdom of God] without being born from above."

Okay, how do we go about doing that? (We're still looking for the how-to.)

Um. We don't. How did you manage to get yourself born the first time?

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ... You must be born from above [Jesus says]. 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.

In other words, you're not in charge of this one, Nicodemus. It happens from above, and that unpredictable Spirit blows as it chooses. You hear the sound of it—the sound of the Spirit resonating in your life. You feel it—the push of the Wind blowing you in God's direction. But you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. It's messy.

And that can be frightening. For we like our lives to be under our control—and if not under control, then at least orderly. And we all have things in our lives we want to hold on to—whether it be that beautiful crystal bowl you got as a gift, or the pictures of your children when they were small. Or your intelligence or artistic gifts. Or your dislike of broccoli or suspicions of Middle Easterners or hatred of the person who bullied you in the 7th grade. Things we hold on to, tight. But the wind blows where it chooses. And it may blow things into our lives that we would not have chosen.

Being born from above is letting God be in charge of our lives. It's letting the Holy Spirit do what God wants done at the depths of our lives.

[And] what is it that God wants to do through the power of the Holy Spirit at the depth of our lives?
 ... Forgive our sins for one thing. [Imagine that—our sins blown away by the Spirit!] Give us and our
 community the courage to live with joy and purpose for someone other than ourselves for another.
 Give us peace and the assurance of eternal life for yet another.²

God wants to blow away our sinfulness and blow into our lives courage and joy and purpose, peace and
 life eternal.

For some people, this being born from above happens with a thunderclap and a quick roar of rushing
 wind. For others of us—as perhaps for Nicodemus himself, who appeared after Jesus’ death to help bury
 him—for many of us, it takes a long time. Pastor Alyce McKenzie notes that in the Gospel of John, being
 born from above ...

is a gradual journey from night to day, from darkness to light. It is a daily pilgrimage
 from belief as reciting a creed

to belief as opening the door to our soul and letting Jesus in.

It's a daily process of flipping the card on our door that says to God "Please do not disturb" to
 "please come in and help us clean our room."³

In the Gospel of John there’s no sudden achievement of faith, as if it were a thing to be gotten. In fact, in
 John the Greek noun πιστις [pistis], meaning *faith*, does not appear at all. But the word πιστευō
 [pisteuo]—*believe*, a verb—appears 90 times. In John, faith is a verb. It’s a process.

It’s a process we can’t control. It may well be messy. It may well be indecipherable and
 incomprehensible.

But we can keep on believing and learning to believe and struggling to believe. We can keep flipping the
 card on our door that says to God, “Please do not disturb,” and open the door to our souls.

We can be born from above. We can see and participate in the kingdom of God. We can keep on being
 blown by the Spirit and growing in our believing. It’s a gift. The gift of Grace. Amen.

² Alyce McKenzie, *Edgy Exegesis : Nicodemus's Non-Decision: Reflections on John 3:1-16* at
<http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Nicodemuss-Non-Decision-Alyce-McKenzie-03-14-2011?offset=2&max=1>

³ Ibid.