

Nicodemus at Night

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 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?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “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. 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.”

In March of 1976, at a campaign event in Winston-Salem on the eve of the North Carolina Democratic primary, a voter asked the former governor of Georgia if he was a “born again” Christian. Jimmy Carter, a Southern Baptist Sunday-school teacher, replied that, yes, of course he was a “born again” Christian, thereby sending every journalist in New York to his rolodex to figure out what in the world he was talking about.

The term comes from today’s Gospel, this wonderfully textured narrative of an exchange between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus, perhaps the most famous conversation in the Bible. The Pharisees were the talk-show hosts of first-century Palestine, loud and provocative, constantly braying their opinions and judgments. But Nicodemus, whom John identifies as “a leader of the Jews,” was different. He was curious about this man from Nazareth. But he was also worried about his reputation and his standing in the community, so he approached Jesus under cover of darkness, not wanting to be seen in public with the man so reviled by other Pharisees.

Nicodemus was deferential, addressing Jesus as “rabbi,” a “teacher who has come from God.” And Nicodemus mentioned the many “signs” that prove the connection of Jesus with the Almighty.

Then the verbal sparring begins. Jesus tells Nicodemus that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” – or, in most translations, “born again.” Neat trick, Nicodemus says. “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” he asks. “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Here, Nicodemus stubbornly insists on responding literally to Jesus, rather than acknowledging that Jesus is speaking spiritually. Jesus says, “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” And then Jesus reaches for the really big metaphor, and one that is especially appropriate on this Trinity Sunday. “The wind blows where it chooses,”

Jesus says, “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.”

The notion of the wind blowing where it chooses is an image of God in search of humanity. God has turned his attention toward us, and this indeed is a departure from the Hebrew scriptures and from the teachings of the Pharisees, where the people were forever trying to placate an angry deity. But Jesus, in his nocturnal conversation with Nicodemus, speaks of a God of love, a God who loves so much that he gave his son so that we might have eternal life.

If today’s Gospel records the most famous conversation in the Bible, this verse, John 3:16, is probably the most famous verse in the Bible: “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.” But the really radical sentiment, in my opinion, comes in the succeeding verse. “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,” Jesus tells Nicodemus, “but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

I don’t think we can fully grasp just how utterly radical and transformative this sentiment sounded to the ears of Nicodemus, a Pharisee. The Pharisees were all about condemnation, citing the law in order to regulate behavior. And Paul underscores this point in today’s Epistle to the Romans, the point that the Spirit, this mysterious third person of the Trinity, confers a new status to people of faith, a status as children of God rather than slaves to the law. “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are Children of God,” Paul writes. “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.”

No wonder the talk-show Pharisees so reviled Jesus. They traded on fear and condemnation, for only they satisfied the law, only they had cracked the code and understood the mind of God. Everyone else fell short of the mark.

But Jesus points to another way; indeed, he *is* another way, a way of love and freedom instead of fear and condemnation. And the Spirit, Jesus says, “blows where it pleases,” which makes it quintessentially unpredictable. No wonder the Pharisees hated Jesus. They craved order and predictability; the Spirit is anything but orderly or predictable.

As Nicodemus vanished into the night following his conversation with Jesus, so too he all but disappears from our view. We have no direct evidence that he became a follower of Jesus. His timidity in approaching Jesus only under cover of darkness suggests that he was unwilling to surrender his credentials as a Pharisee.

The followers of John Calvin picked up on this in the sixteenth century. They coined the term Nicodemites to refer to those who were secretly persuaded of the truth of the gospel but refused to go public with their affirmations. For the Calvinists, Nicodemus was a synonym for cowardice.

Still, no one emerges unchanged from an encounter with Jesus. Nicodemus surfaces twice more in John’s Gospel. We have a fleeting glimpse of him defending Jesus, albeit timidly, before the chief priests and the Pharisees, apparently to no avail. But then, after the crucifixion, Nicodemus emerges from the darkness. He helps Joseph of Arimathea remove the slumping body of Jesus from the cross, prepare it for burial, and lay him in the tomb. John records that Joseph of Arimathea “was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews.”¹ I wonder if that same description also applies to Nicodemus.

No one, after all, emerges unchanged from an encounter with Jesus.

Second Sunday in Lent

March 20, 2011

¹ John 18:38 (NRSV).

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