

We have a Pharisee, a leader of the temple, as John has it, to thank for one of the most of quoted verses of scripture in the Bible. John 3:16 is *the* proof-text scripture most of used to explain Christian faith. However, most people leave out that it comes as the ending bid in a long verbal sparring match between Jesus and this temple leader, Nicodemus.

He only shows up in the Gospel of John and was a member of the Pharisee class. Frequently they are cast as villains, pitted against Jesus and the disciples as the villains in their story. Got to a modern temple service, though, and you will often hear the Pharisees quoted in the "devar" or sermon that the rabbi give. Pharisees were, for the most part, pretty good guys (no women Pharisees, sorry) who preserved Judaism as we know it, though, and made us able to have the "synagogue on the corner".

Nicodemus was educated and he lead the way in the conventional religion for his day. He would have watched Jesus from afar and been a part of many murmuring klatches of folks looking upon Jesus with great suspicion and resentment. See this Jesus associated with folk he was not accustomed to mixing with-- the unclean and the impoverished-- fishmongers and blue collar types-- tax collectors -- ladies of the night---Samaritan Jews and small children.

Yet one particular night, for a reason no one is really sure about, Nicodemus pulls a risky move. Something wakes him up in the middle of the night.. some thought... some revelation... some kind of discomfort--an epiphany, perhaps. He crawls out of bed, gets dressed, and sneaks over to where Jesus is staying to talk.

Just a conversation with this itinerant preacher could have gotten him into a lot of trouble. But Nicodemus had seen some of the miracles Jesus had performed or some of his words had sunk him and here he was, on this dark and stormy night, to have deep conversation with Jesus.

In his opening bid, Nicodemus even admits that Jesus is from God because he has done wonders that must be the result of one who must be in the "presence of God." Nicodemus gets it-- this Jesus is for real. As they do many times in the middle of the night, the conversation gets weird. Jesus, we see today .. *was* really good with messing with people's heads.

What a thing Jesus proposes to Nicodemus and to us-- that in order to be a part of God's kingdom we must be "born again" or "born from above?" Nicodemus gets lost in the metaphor and thinks, for a split second perhaps, that this Jesus has lost his mind and is suggesting that he thinks we must "enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born."

What an odd and disturbing notion, isn't it, that we must be "born again."
One meaning of what Jesus is saying is "born from above" or "born from the spirit"

but Nicodemus, probably being kind of a literal type of person in his reading of Torah - of scripture -- takes Jesus on surface value and thinks he means kind of a do-over.

I mean, who can blame him for resisting *that* notion. I am not so sure, given the opportunity, I would want to be born any differently from how I was the *first time*. I am not so sure I would want to be like the movies where a grown person gets to go back to high school and relive those experiences. Sure, I would enjoy *not* snoring or not having the pain of a messed up rotator cuff or the blurriness of presbyopia or being able to once again have a 28 inch waist... Reliving that part would be good.

But having a *total* do-over is a harrowing notion. I am kind of with Nicodemus when he resists this idea of being *born again*. Weird.

But he is there. He is with Jesus, talking and getting his view of things taken askew. And what a thing for Nicodemus, this man of the ruling class, to do in the middle of the night. Something about what Jesus said and did stirred him to take such a risk. On some level, searching for a new life--so much so that he came to Jesus to talk, one on one.

We are Nicodemus. We stand off from afar from this Jesus and watch him work.. know that what we read of and experience is perhaps somehow true..

I am Nicodemus. However, as a member of polite society, what I am in need of these days is the *other* kind of birth Jesus talks of today. In fact, on most days I am in *great* need of being reborn "of the spirit." Like Nicodemus, we are awakened in the middle of the night to realize none of the things that fill our busy schedules quite do it all.... We realize that, in the end, ... we too need a savior-- we too need rebirth. We need the kind of "rebirth" Jesus talks about is one that comes *only* from God. A rebirth of *spirit*.

Nicodemus would have known about *spirit*. The Hebrew word that they would have been familiar with-- ruach-- also means "wind." Jesus uses a nice little pun here, further messing with his head, and tries to help Nicodemus understand that this kind of rebirth is not an act of will or achievement or righteousness or reason but a gift, freely bestowed upon us by God- a gift as free as the wind that blows in his face.

Now don't get me wrong, I am a big fan of reason and the steady progress it has handed us in the last few hundred years or so and beyond. I am a big fan of working hard and doing well and producing meaningful work in my life.

However, I think one of the ways in which our brokenness shows up loud and clear is that we think that is all we need- is to *understand* and to *work hard and be good*.

Somehow we are convinced that if we work hard enough, achieve enough, let the market do its work, create just the right conditions in our society or government, we will be saved. We are convinced that if we get all the elements of our life under control, we will be saved. We are convinced that if we can enact and be successful in *our* programs, purposes and goals.

I have a suspicion, though that we are all here, week after week, because we have come to realize in our lives that that kind of salvation is not quite enough. We too need to be "born again" or "born from above."

The shrill voices in Christendom these days dominate this language-- own this language of being born again. Being "born again" has been co-opted by Christian fundamentalists, and it's a shame. We don't talk too much about that here in the Episcopal Church, but we do it all the time. Every week when we participate in this holy meal of the body and blood of Christ we are regenerated anew-- our bodies are transformed and changed by this meal we share. We are born again.

We need to, like Nicodemus, let Jesus mess with our heads-- and challenge us with the notion of new birth. During Lent and during all times, every week in fact, we are invited to a new kind of life with God, to let the spirit blow where it may... uncontrollable, having its way with us..

Christ invites to a relationship with God that gives us access to new birth not just one time. Being born again is not just a singular life event that we can point to like our first birthday but is a relationship that God now invites us into, now that he has sent Jesus to bring new life to all of his people. Life with Christ allows us to be born again and again and again and again-- all of us-- even the Nicodemuses of the world-- of which I am definitely one.

Wake up. Meet this Jesus. Let him mess with your head. Be born again.