

How Do We Begin Again?

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John 3:1-9

This text leaves me with so many questions.

For starters, why did Nicodemus come to Jesus at night?

We assume it is because he was afraid to be seen with Jesus during the day, didn't want to be publicly associated with the troublemaking rabbi.

But we actually don't know that for sure.

Maybe he came at night so that he could have a real conversation with Jesus—not away from prying eyes, but away from interrupting mouths, away from those who might try to trap or trick Jesus.

Or maybe he sought not answers but relationship, wanting to get to know Jesus personally, away from all the hubbub.

I also want to know who “we” is.

“Rabbi, **we** know that you are a teacher who has come from God.”

Nicodemus was a Pharisee; so was he referring to the Pharisees?

A subset within the Pharisees?

Was he sent as an envoy? a liaison?

We know that the Pharisees were a movement among Jews that followed both written and oral Torah—

both the written scriptures and the oral tradition.

They also tried to extend Jewish practice into all areas of life.

As such, they were experts in “the law,”

and although the Gospels contain many stories of the Pharisees trying to trap Jesus, we don't know if this is the case in our story.

We actually don't know why Nicodemus came to Jesus at all.

He doesn't appear to have come with a prepared question, which is unusual in the Gospels.

Usually when a Jewish expert came to Jesus, it was with a question.

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

Which is the greatest commandment?

Should we pay tax to the Roman Emperor?

Nicodemus just led with:

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God,
for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.”

No question, just a statement.

It wasn't until Jesus responded with his enigmatic statement
that Nicodemus asked questions.

So let's look at Jesus' statement and the questions that followed.

I'm trusting that you don't actually have your Bibles open on your laps
so let me ask you to finish the line from memory.

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born...”

...

There are three different ways of translating the Greek.

The King James and the New International Version both say “born again.”

Others, including the Orthodox Jesus Bible, say “born anew.”

The NRSV and others say “born from above.”

“Born again” might have been a useful translation before the 20th century,
but since then it has been co-opted by the evangelical branch

of the Christian family tree

to mean their very particular understanding of the Bible
and the world.

So I'd rather focus on the other two.

Regarding the phrase “born from above,”
some scholars say that the writer of John's Gospel

“leans towards a fusion of Judaism
with themes from Greek philosophy influenced by Plato.”¹

It is possible that the writer saw the world as a two-story universe.

It seems that to John, “The ‘world’ is the lower story,

a sphere of hate, darkness, falsehood, slavery, and scarcity . . .

a sphere of existence that lives in pain with only partial knowledge of God.

The upper story is heaven, centered around God.

¹ Allen, Ronald J.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-31-17-11>

It is a sphere of life, light, truth, freedom and abundance.”²

We don't need to think of these spheres as literal places.

John is saying (perhaps) that humans live in a world marked by hate, falsehood, and scarcity,

and that to experience the kingdom of God we need to be born into a world marked by life, truth, freedom, and abundance.

That's lovely, but how the heck do we do it?

David Ewart, a United Church of Canada minister, has this to say:

“Being born anew / from above is a huge transformation,

since it means quite literally starting over with a new ‘family of origin.’

In Jesus' day, one's birth - one's family and the place one was born – determined for life one's status and honour.

And even in our day, one's family - one's childhood - has a huge influence on our character and life choices / opportunities.

Being born anew / from above relocates our identity and resets possibilities for our character and life choices / opportunities.

We literally become children of God, of the Spirit.

To be ‘a child of’ means to bear the seed of, to be begotten of, to bear the likeness of.

It also...creates a new family of [siblings] regardless of previous birth.”³

The connection with the story I'm about to share

came to me during Bible study on Wednesday night

so those of you who participated can take a brief nap while I share it again!

My wife Jackie did not grow up in the church.

She attended occasionally with her grandmother

and sometimes she walked down the street and went on her own.

But she wasn't really a church person.

She fell into the vast category of “spiritual but not religious.”

In undergrad she took a class on feminist theology just for fun, and another on liberation theology.

So she wasn't uneducated on religious matters, and she was deeply spiritual;

² Allen, Ronald J.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-31-17-11>

³ <https://www.holytextures.com/2009/05/john-3-1-17-year-b-trinity-sunday.html>

she just wasn't churched and didn't really see the point.
 After we had been dating for some time
 she started attending the little church I pastored in Connecticut.
 She wasn't too sure about them at first
 but they very quickly drew her in.
 One day as I was preaching I looked out and saw tears streaming down her face.
 And let me tell you, it's not easy to preach when someone you love
 is sitting there crying and you have no idea why!
 After worship I sat down next to her where she still sat crying in the pew,
 and she said to me,
 "All my life I have claimed to believe in a God of connection,
 and all the while I have been on a solitary spiritual journey.
 I need to join this church."

I think that was the day Jackie was born anew into a new family—
 or maybe it was the day she acknowledged it,
 for birth is not an instantaneous act.
 One writer talks about how the most amazing moments in his life
 were when his two sons were born. He writes:
 "Words like miracle, connection, extra-alive, and heart-burst all come to mind —
 but none are adequate to fully capture the moment.
 And yet ... That moment was the culmination of one long process,
 and the starting point of another long process.
 Each boy was able to be born because some months earlier
 my wife and I conceived them.
 And THAT act happened because years before that, we met, dated,
 got engaged, and got married.
 And all along the journey of our lives, there were events and decisions
 and influences that affected each of us, and us as a couple,
 and eventually our two sons.
 In other words, 'being born' is an event, a point in time —
 but it is also the result of a process,
 a process with tendrils that reach sometimes far into the past.
 So I think we need a new word; a word that captures both the point in time
 and the process that got us there....
 Just for this Reflection [he writes], let's go with 'born-ed' and 'born-ing'
 to show both the process and the event.

Why make the distinction? Because I think that Jesus's words in John 3 are sometimes at risk of being too closely associated with that single-point-in-time meaning of 'born,' and if we do that, we miss something important....

I think we have taken that profound truth and twisted it, cheapened it, by focusing only on the birth event and not on the process of being born-ed....

What does it change of our understanding of John 3 if we recast

'you must be born again' into

'you must allow the seeds of the Spirit to enter your soul, germinate there, grow there, until finally they come forth in an amazing and God-filled way, and your very nature and your relationship to all around you is changed forever'?

How does it affect our relationship to others, if we know that

the way we deal with them might be part of the process of born-ing?

And finally, are we okay with trusting the process of born-ing

as God's timing and the Spirit moving as it will,

rather than us trying to force a new birth through spiritual inducing?"⁴

And this is where the whole question of being born anew gets really interesting... because maybe it isn't all up to us.

Yes, we have to choose to begin again.

We have to choose to let that seed enter our soul.

We have to choose to value and to seek a life in that realm of

"light, truth, freedom and abundance."

But what if—like our first birth—it isn't totally up to us?

What if being born anew were both choice and act of grace?

Both our breath and the breath of the spirit?

What if it is also an act of the community in which we have found our home?

Jackie wouldn't have been drawn into that little church in Connecticut

nearly as quickly if she hadn't had meaningful conversations previously

with a UCC minister she met in the UConn Rainbow Center,

or rented a room in grad school from a woman called Grandma Trudy

who attended a UCC church.

And Jackie connected with the good people of King Street UCC

because they had already done their work

to become a warm and welcoming community.

⁴ <https://brucewriter.com/the-process-of-being-born-ed-john-3/>

Our question this week from our Lenten series is “How do we begin again?”
And I know some of you need new beginnings and fresh starts.

You need a new beginning in your marriage,
or a fresh start in your parenting
because you know that what you’re doing isn’t working.

You need a new beginning in your career,
or at least a new challenge to get you out of that slump.

You need to begin anew in your attempts to get off the drugs or alcohol.

You need to begin anew with hope.

How do we begin again?

I don’t have the answers for you. I wish I did.

But I do know it’s a process,
and that borning isn’t instantaneous,
and that tendrils of the past make it possible
and that it takes a village.

Maybe the question isn’t “how do we begin again”
but “Do I believe in the possibility of beginning again?”
And “Will I be willing to step into the promise of what may be?”