

The Nicodemus Syndrome

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Genesis 12:1-4
Romans 4:1-5; 13-17
John 3:1-17

Between last Sunday and today, we have moved from the chaos of prehistory in Genesis three through eleven, to the beginning of God’s act to do something about the mess human life has become. God sneaks up on Abram, out of the blue, and says, “Go! Go to a land that I will show you and I will make you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great. Those who bless you I will bless and those who curse you I will curse.” Abram does! He pulls up tent stakes, packs everything up, and he, his wife, and nephew head out as God has told him. Does he do so simply because God promises to bless him, and through him all the people of the earth? Or, is there more going on?

Abram’s obedience is the first step in God’s plan to deal with sin and death through a covenant with Abraham. Rather than allow humanity to stumble deeper into chaos, God is intervening, promising a covenant of blessing through Abram in which all the people of the earth can flourish as God intended when creating us.¹ Ever after he will be known as “Father Abraham,” exemplar of faith; and model of what it means to live life in a relationship with God. Quoting Genesis Paul today says, “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”²

The word "believed" here can also be translated “faith” or “trust”—in the Bible they mean the same thing.³ “Righteousness” means being in a right relationship with God, the One who gives life to the dead, and calls into existent things that do not exist—new life. God is not playing around here; all the peoples of the earth are to be blessed through Abraham’s obedience.

Now to Nicodemus. John tells us Nicodemus is a Pharisee. How much do you know about Pharisees? We hear a lot about them in the Gospels and they often get a bad reputation. Pharisees were a group of lay religious leaders who were perhaps the most faithful of the day. They believed that all of the rules for maintaining the priesthood’s holiness applied not only to priests but to all Israelites. Their life was the pursuit of holiness by scrupulously keeping the Law of Moses.

Nicodemus was not only a leading Pharisee and teacher of the Law, he was also a member of the ruling council in Jerusalem. Perhaps that is why he has come to Jesus by night. But John is not simply telling us the time of day; he wants us to know that Nicodemus is very much in the dark about Jesus. He calls Jesus “Teacher” establishing common ground and then says “We know that you are a teacher that has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”⁴

Jesus responds *Amen!, Amen!* that translates “Verily, Verily,” “Yea, Verily!” Truly, Absolutely! Jesus is saying “Yes, you are absolutely right! And whenever Jesus says *Amen* twice it is time to listen up. He continues, “No one can enter the kingdom of God without having been born again..., anew..., from above..., from heaven..., from God.” Which is it? Actually, the word Jesus uses in Greek means all of that.⁵

Do you hear what Jesus has just said to Nicodemus, that in his darkened confusion Nicodemus has missed? Nicodemus **Is** seeing the kingdom of God at work in Jesus. “Nic” **Is** being born from above. God has broken in on him to reveal to him who Jesus is and draw Nicodemus into the kingdom of God. Will he enter it? Unfortunately, in his preoccupation and self-absorption with who he is, he misses it. He thinks Jesus is talking about a second physical birth.

Carl Jung would say, Nicodemus is so preoccupied with the agenda of the first half of his life, learning the rules, keeping them, finding his place in the world, maintaining his ego and identity, he cannot step into the second half of life to discover what God is up to with him. Spiritually, he is still locked in his childhood. Life has probably been too good for him: no crises, no failures, no moments of public embarrassment to shake him out of his self-importance and religious certainties. He thinks he has it all together, especially in things pertaining to God. I call it the Nicodemus Syndrome.

But that said—and this is important—God is still at work in his life. He is being borne from above whether he knows it or not. He has seen Jesus’ miraculous signs for what they are—the presence and power of the kingdom of God in Jesus. God is still at work in Nicodemus even when he does not know it.

Here is one of the truths of this lesson that is so often missed: God is at work in each one of us, whether we know it or not, trying to draw us into the second half of our lives to know the power and promise of God’s covenant of blessing that came to fulfillment in Jesus. We may be clueless to that. But that in no way hinders God. Remember, in the end, God always win!

Jesus tries a second tack. He tells Nicodemus that we all need two births, one by water and the other by Spirit. Though many commentators have seen birth by water as an allusion to baptism—the moment we are born into new life in Christ—that is not what Jesus is talking about. As every mother here knows, water is the prelude to birth. The moment her water breaks, birth cannot be far behind.

Still, because that physical birth thrusts us into a world dominated by the power of sin, we need a spiritual birth as well. We need a birth from above that joins us to God in Christ, a spiritual link that bears us through life’s challenges, failures, embarrassments, and yes, even successes. For success can be even more treacherous

than failure—ask any rock-star.

Well, nice try, Jesus. But Nic still doesn't get it. The question for us is "Do we?" "The wind blows where it chooses, and we hear the sound of it, but we do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone born of the spirit." How, after all, did you and I get here except for the Spirit blowing in our lives?

The Spirit is blowing in Nicodemus' life. Can he let go of his childhood understanding of religion—his self-importance and convictions as a Pharisee—his self-righteous determination to be holy, set apart from the rest of the world, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven on God's terms rather than his own? Can we?

The Spirit has been blowing in our lives from before we drew that first breath that enabled us to wail our way into life. Some of us were aware of it very early in life, others of us later, and others of us are still scratching our heads, trying to figure all of this religious stuff out. No matter, God is still at work in each of us inviting us into his covenant of blessing—once again, "God always wins!"

God is inviting us to "let go and let God."⁶ As Jung warns, those trying to hang on to the rules of life they learned as a child, attempting to make it on their own, are missing the abundant life God's covenant of blessing in Christ promises.

Nicodemus, still in the dark responds, "How can this be?" Jesus is flabbergasted, asking, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

Until now, Jesus has been speaking directly to Nicodemus. Now the conversation shifts to us. You can't hear that because in English, "You" can be both singular and plural. From now on Jesus uses the plural, speaking to the church for which John wrote this gospel and through it to us.

Speaking of his divine origin and "descent" into this world to become one of us, he announces why he has done so. He must be lifted up. In this gospel "being lifted up" is theological code for crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. All of this must take place if the power of sin and death is to be broken and the covenant promise to Abram come to fulfillment.⁷

Jesus has come from God, become one with us, and will do what he must do to make us one with God in him so that we can join in his victory over sin and death and become who God first intended us to be. Whoever believes in him, whoever trusts in him, whoever has faith in will not perish but have eternal life. John then writes the best known verse in the New Testament, "God so loved the world...." Luther called it the gospel in miniature.

A word about this promise of eternal life: it is about far more than life after

death. It is about life NOW, life in the midst of sin and death, its chaos, and its failures. Eternal life in John's gospel is a metaphor for the quality of life that comes from being in relationship with God through Jesus now. One with God in Christ, we are being borne from above to be Christ's people in this world.

That is one of the reasons we come to this table. For here we receive Christ afresh in bread and wine, that we may continue to grow into the fullness of him, become more like him, and out of his presence in us, live the life he calls us to live as his people.

How else can we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves? How else can we have the courage not to return evil for evil, but seek to overcome evil with good? How else can we find strength to abandon self-centeredness and a paranoid sense of scarcity, to become generous in this world? How else do we welcome the outcast? How else does the alcoholic become sober and the addict, clean? How else do we learn to care for the weak, poor, rather than blame them for their poverty? How else do we learn to love our enemy?

Come then, not because you are strong, but because you are weak. Come, not because any goodness of your own gives you a right to come, but because you need mercy and help. Come, because you love the Lord a little and would like to love him more. Come because the Lord loves you and gave himself for you. Come, taste and see that the Lord is good—he is bearing you from above into his kingdom and its promise of eternal and abundant life.

The Word of the Lord; thanks be to God!

¹. It has been called “the covenant of blessing” because the command includes a series of seven promises.

² Genesis 15:6

³. *aman* in Hebrew, *pisteuo* in Greek

⁴ The latter is a more literal translation of the Greek. The old Revised Standard Version is closer saying, “unless God is with him.”

⁵ The word is *anōthen* and means “anew” “over again,” “from above, a higher place,” “from heaven or God.

⁶ Thanks to the member of All Saints who reminded me that this comes from the 12 Step program of alcoholics anonymous.

⁷ This is just the first of four times Jesus will say it of himself in this gospel. John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32; 12:34.