

This encounter of Jesus and Nicodemus is the first of four great encounter stories that happen in the first part of the gospel of John and that are part of our series of readings for Lent. Today is Jesus and Nicodemus, next week is Jesus and the woman at the well, then Jesus and the man born blind and finally, the Sunday before Palm Sunday, Jesus and Lazarus. Fundamental to each of these stories are questions of faith, as these encounters with Jesus challenge the one encountered, and those around them—challenge their assumptions, challenge what they believed to be true, and challenge their belief in this one who has come with incredible claims and amazing signs. In each story there are questions of what we is known and unknown, seen and not seen, believed and not believed, and throughout, themes of water and spirit run like a rich and life-giving stream.

A teacher of mine referred to this story of Nicodemus and Jesus as “Nic at Night.” Right away we hear that Nicodemus is both a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, and he comes to Jesus by night—when nobody else is around, when he can’t be seen, when it will only be a conversation between him and Jesus. He comes because he knows of the signs that Jesus has done and believes—because of those signs—that Jesus must have come from God.

Nicodemus comes with the first stirrings of belief.

He comes with questions.

But he comes at night. Perhaps he is afraid. Afraid he will lose standing among the Jews and other religious leaders. Afraid that his leanings toward Jesus will be

exposed and he will be caught out talking to this renegade, this one who created such a stir in the temple, upsetting tables and challenging the established order. Maybe he's longing to know God but afraid of what he's going to find out, afraid it will call him in directions he doesn't want, or isn't prepared to go. He's beginning to believe, but is unwilling to confess it in the light of day. He comes at night and his faith exists in a kind of spiritual night.

And the conversation with Jesus doesn't go well. They aren't on the same page. In fact, it seems they are talking past one another. Nicodemus speaks from one set of assumptions and Jesus is coming from someplace quite different. Nicodemus seems not to hear Jesus.

Let's dig a bit into their conversation, unpack it and see what we have, what we can hear going on in this encounter between these two men.

Nicodemus comes talking of signs, in fact, he comes because of the signs. The only sign that we hear of so far in the gospel of John is Jesus turning the water to wine at the wedding at Cana, but according to the text right before our reading, there have been other signs, and many have come to believe in his name because of them. Jesus has also just expressed wariness of those who believe just because of the signs.

So, as Nicodemus comes talking of signs, Jesus wants to lay out the heart of the matter right from the start. He says, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." In other words, believing because of signs—proofs—isn't going to do it. One needs to experience radical change and that change comes from God. But Nicodemus seems not to understand. It's helpful at this point to understand that there is a wordplay going on in the Greek. The word Jesus used for

“above” also means “again” and it means “anew”—same word, three different meanings. So when he says to Nicodemus that he must be born from above, Nicodemus hears that he needs to be born again. So that’s why he starts in on this seemingly out-of-left-field riff about an old man entering again into his mother’s womb.

Jesus response is most powerfully and beautifully expressed in The Message translation.

“Jesus said, "You're not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the 'wind-hovering-over-the-water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it's not possible to enter God's kingdom.

[repeat]

Two things I want to highlight in what Jesus has said here...

First, There’s no half measures.

You don’t stand outside looking in. Faith in God through Jesus Christ is something that requires one’s whole self, it’s a full commitment, beyond fear and tentativeness and uncertainty. Faith in God calls for all we have, every fiber of our being, it calls us out of our spiritual night into the light of day, into the light of God’s promise, into the light of God’s love for us. Jesus calls us to submit fully to the promise of God that has been made real in his very person.

Second, we don’t do it.

No one chooses to be born, no one by their own decision-making, through their own insight, by their own power, hauls themselves kicking and screaming into the world. The language from the Message translation is one of submission, we submit to the “wind-

hovering-over the water creation.” We submit to God’s creative and redeeming power. We say yes to the life that God calls us to.

Look at Abraham and Sarah—or Abram and Sarai as we first hear of them. We don’t know much about Abram and Sarai before what we hear in today’s reading, only where they live and that Sarai is barren. God says to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house...” In other words, leave everything that you know, everything that is familiar to you, everything in which you have found your sense of self and your identity... Leave it all for what I am promising you. Leave it all and trust that this one who makes promises keeps promises. Trust the promise maker to be a promise keeper. Leave all you know to live in hope.

And what does Abraham do?

He goes. He goes. No half-measures, no questions, no second-guessing. He goes.

And Paul makes clear that Abraham’s response is one of faith. Faith in God who gives life to the dead and who calls into existence the things that do not exist. Abraham’s righteousness doesn’t come from what he does, but rather from his faith. And the Abraham’s faith is a gift from God, something worked in him, something called into existence by God. Abraham didn’t do it, instead Abraham submits to it. Abraham says yes to the life that God calls him to.

It’s not what we do, and there are no half measures. But rather than asking our questions and looking for ways to find assurance that meets our standards for rational assessment. Rather than constantly testing, is this real, is this for me, is this what I am supposed to do, rather than standing on the outside looking in, coming in the dark hoping not to be seen, living only part of the life of faith that God has called us to.

Rather than all that, we are called instead to live fully in God's promise. To go where God calls us. To proclaim our faith in the brilliant light of day for all to see.

To say: Yes I believe,

Yes I trust that God is there, even when I can't feel it.

Yes I know that Jesus saves and brings new life—every day.

Yes, my life is ruled by my faith in the one who gives me everything that I need.

Yes, I believe.

And it's not about what I do. This faith is not one more personal achievement of mine—or one more test I try for yet fail. This faith is a free gift from God—worked in my heart.

Paul Tillich describes what it is like to come to faith, to submit to the original “wind-hovering over the water creation.”

“Do we know what it means to be struck by grace? It does not mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the Savior, or that the Bible contains the truth. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual...It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us...when despair destroys all joy and courage...a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you...Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is

transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin and reconciliation bridges the gulf of our separation.”

Accept that you are accepted and walk into the light of God’s promise.