

May we continue the journey of being born from above

Second Sunday in Lent

March 1, 2026

May each of us continue the journey of being born from above.

On that long ago night in Palestine, a warm gentle breeze was flowing in from the east. Jesus stood there in Jerusalem's darkness, watching patiently as he observed a figure slowly emerging from the shadows. He recognized the man's profession by the style of his hair and the look of his garments. He was a teacher of religious law, a Pharisee. The two men standing there were an odd-looking pair indeed; Nicodemus carrying the air of sophistication and refinement of someone having been trained in Jerusalem, while Jesus was obviously from some distant Galilean town, clothed in a simple nondescript robe. The first man was a keeper of the law, the other had been called a lawbreaker by some.

As Jesus searched Nicodemus's face, he saw there a firmness and passion, born of a zeal for the Law of Moses. Jesus deeply admired what he saw in this man. Yet his heart was also filled with sorrow for Nicodemus. For along with his vast education and training, Jesus knew that, just like many others of his profession, he had been shackled and boxed in to an ancient tradition that had narrowed his vision of reality, and set firm rigid boundaries around truth, hindering him from being open to the deeper mysteries of God.

Yet, despite Nicodemus' apparent blindness to the vast glories of the fullness of the reign of God, Jesus saw something within him that the two men held in common, a deep hunger for God.

And as Nicodemus looked at Jesus, he perceived in this simple appearing man, something truly rare; the divine spark of God, and a bottomless depth to him that belied his common Galilean background. Nicodemus sensed that he could spend a lifetime learning from this simple Rabbi, and he hungered to enter upon that journey. Yes, Jesus just might hold the answers to what his mind and heart and soul longed for.

But how would Nicodemus ever begin such a weighty conversation? He chose the easy route when he said: "Rabbi, we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you." Yes, it was obvious that Nicodemus had perceived something very special in Jesus. But before the Pharisee could say anything more, Jesus interrupted him by asking one of his signature paradoxical questions, one that shot straight to the heart of Nicodemus' need: "I tell you the truth, unless you are born from above, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." Other translations read "born again," rather than "born from above." The Greek word can mean either, although it is usually translated as, from above. Jesus was telling the Pharisee, Nicodemus, you cannot see the kingdom of God unless you are born again, born from above.

Nicodemus had lived his life in a very tight constricted theological box, and in that state he would only be capable of understanding an infinitesimally

small amount of what Jesus was about to tell him. Nicodemus' response reveals his confusion: "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time, can he?" In Jesus' next response lies the key to his message. And of course, it would not be a return to the womb for a second physical birth, but a new kind of birth, a birth from above.

Jesus said: "I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." Jesus told Nicodemus that just as each person is born physically through water, so all are called to be born spiritually of the Holy Spirit of God from above.

Jesus was telling this passionate devout religious teacher, that there was still something missing in his life, a birth from the Spirit of God, a deeper experience, a deeper knowledge, a deeper wisdom, a deeper theology, a more intimate walk with God.

As I spent time on this interaction between these two men, I saw much of my younger self in Nicodemus. Just like that ancient Pharisee who had been born into the Jewish religious faith through circumcision and religious observance and training in the Torah, I had been born into the Christian faith in 1977 and attended religious services and learned from our sacred scriptures. Just like Nicodemus, my religious experience and training had grounded me in the faith. But I also now knew that just like Nicodemus, this grounding had also boxed me in, narrowing my vision, and setting rigid

boundaries around what I understood to be truth. Yes, my younger self, that man in his 20's and 30's and 40's, was a man much like Nicodemus; although well-grounded in my faith, and passionate, and zealous, and devout, I could not yet be open to perceiving the deeper mysteries of God.

Just as Nicodemus had been born into the Jewish faith and was in need of a new deeper birth from above, I too had been born into the Christian faith many years ago, but was also in need of a new birth from above. Nicodemus had needed to be freed from the rigidity of the Law of Moses; I needed to be freed from the rigidity of my fundamentalist Christian background. Nicodemus and Joe Hudson both needed to see more of the fullness of the reign of God; to see a deeper knowledge, a deeper wisdom, a deeper theology.

What was true of Nicodemus and me, was also true of the Apostle Paul. He had been a Pharisee just like Nicodemus. He was a man steeped in the Law of Moses. He once referred to his Jewish pedigree with these words: "I am a Jew born in Tarsus in Cilicia but brought up in [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today." Despite all of Paul's impressive and admirable qualities, he too needed a new birth from above. His came by way of a blinding light; being thrown from his horse and struck blind. Paul was referring to this new birth in today's epistle where he contrasts the Law of Moses with grace. He wrote: "For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs [of the kingdom], faith is null and the promise is void...That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be

guaranteed to all his offspring.” Elsewhere Paul spoke of the Law this way: “Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.” Paul was saying that the Law of Moses had been the Jewish disciplinarian, giving them parameters and guidelines to structure their lives as a community. But when Christ came, when faith came, the birth from above came, and there was no longer a need for that disciplinarian.

But having a “disciplinarian;” a set of structures and parameters as a guide for life, is not a bad thing. You and I are called to adhere to, maybe not a disciplinarian, but to a rule of faith and life. We adhere to the ancient Christian Creeds and our Episcopal Baptismal Covenant and Catechism. We adhere to these as an important part of our rule of life.

But unfortunately, there have been many people, Jew and Gentile, including many Christians – who live under a harsh disciplinarian. Nicodemus and Paul were among them, as was I. Many in the Christian church are still living under the rigidity of the law; a demanding Code they grew up with in their family and their religious tradition; a disciplinarian that boxed them in and hindered them from seeing more fully. I do not regret the religious tradition that had boxed me in for many years, because it has blessed me with many gifts. Yet, along with its blessings, it had not set me fully free to experience the abundant life Jesus calls each of us to.

Today as I experience my life and faith journey, I have just enough spiritual sight, to know that I am still not yet where God is calling me to be; not yet fully free, not yet experiencing the fullness of the abundant life that Jesus calls each of us towards. There are still more births from above yet to come for me; still deeper mysteries into God, deeper experiences, deeper knowing, deeper wisdom, deeper theology, a more intimate walk with God.

As I continue on that journey, I use the words of the apostle Paul to the church in Philippi as my guide. Near the end of his life, he wrote words that guided him, and that guide me, as I strive towards further growth, and fulfilling the longings of my heart; towards a deeper knowing and new births from above. Paul wrote this: "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." As an old man, Paul still knew that God had more internal and external work to do in his life. And so he was still straining towards the goal.

May you and I continue to strain towards that goal. May we continue to move towards one after another new births in the Spirit; delving into the deeper mysteries of God, deeper experiences, deeper knowledge, deeper wisdom, deeper theology, and a more intimate walk with God.

Jesus told Nicodemus and you and me: “Unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”