

3 There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.”

3 Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it’s not possible to see God’s kingdom.”

4 Nicodemus asked, “How is it possible for an adult to be born? It’s impossible to enter the mother’s womb for a second time and be born, isn’t it?”

5 Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. 6 Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Don’t be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ 8 God’s Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. It’s the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

9 Nicodemus said, “How are these things possible?”

10 Jesus answered, “You are a teacher of Israel and you don’t know these things? 11 I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don’t receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up 15 so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. 16 God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. 17 God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him isn’t judged; whoever doesn’t believe in him is already judged, because they don’t believe in the name of God’s only Son.

19 “This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. 20 All who do wicked things hate the light and don’t come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. 21 Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God.”

(Common English Bible)

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In the first year, or maybe it was the first four months, of the pandemic, there were many reflections about the gift of slowing down, clearing calendars, simplifying life. As we approach the third year of this pandemic, most of us are busy again, even as we are once again invited to exercise extreme caution while a highly infectious variant makes its way through our communities. Perhaps some of us have good rhythms of rest and activity, but many of us, I think, feel somewhat out of balance in this regard. Therefore, let us attend to the road sign before us today. A Yield sign invites us to pause. I'm working right now on taking regular pauses throughout my day— to stand up for awhile, to walk, to focus on my breath. When I remember to do this I'm given new perspective and enabled to keep making progress on the mountain of to-dos before me on any given day.

Perhaps it's not obvious how this sign connects to our Gospel reading today. I see this encounter, at night, between Nicodemus and Jesus, as a moment when Nicodemus was yielding. This Pharisee, a deeply faithful Jew particularly concerned with right living, this Jewish leader, comes to Jesus and makes a statement about what he knows. He says "We know," I'm not sure who else he has in mind, but he says some lovely things about Jesus, shows him great respect, calls him rabbi, or teacher, and acknowledges that he certainly has come from God or he could not do the things he's been doing. Jesus seems unimpressed by his knowledge. Or perhaps he honors this greeting with a nugget of wisdom. Some might even call it a riddle. "I assure you, unless someone is born anew (or born from above, one Greek word means both things) it's not possible to see God's kingdom." This seems rather like a non-sequitur. And it is a bit of a head scratcher, for any of us, I imagine. But it is possible he is suggesting that there is a great deal Nicodemus does not know and that for him to rightly understand the words he has just uttered, he needs radical transformation.

Nicodemus doesn't get it. He takes Jesus' words very literally with a question about the possibility of climbing back into one's mother's womb. I recently heard some scholars suggest that the author is poking fun at those who only stay on the surface, who take Jesus' teachings literally. In any case, the follow up question suggests that there is

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depth that Nicodemus is missing. There is a lot he does not know. There is much he does not understand. He could have been offended, gotten defensive— powerful people often do. They don't like having misunderstanding or ignorance exposed. But Nicodemus stays. He yields.

Jesus tries again. Now instead of saying one must be born anew or from above, he says one must be born of water and Spirit. One's first birth is a birth of flesh, one's second birth is a birth of Spirit. And he elaborates, speaking of the freedom of the Spirit or Wind of God, blowing where it will, we can perceive the effects, but we can't see it, we can't control it. God grants rebirth through the sending of the Spirit; we don't make it happen.

Nicodemus is still confused. "How are these things possible?" And Jesus says something that could be taken quite harshly, "You are a teacher of Israel and yet you don't understand these things?" I listened to a rabbi reflecting on this text this week and she said, "I am a teacher of Israel and I don't understand these things." She said if it were not for the notes in her study Bible she would have had no idea that "water and Spirit" is a Baptism reference. Did you catch that? Maybe not. But her colleague, a Presbyterian pastor, pointed to a passage in Ezekiel, in chapter 36 of this prophetic book, suggesting one scholar connects Jesus' words here to that passage. Hear these words from the prophet Ezekiel, just a bit of promise to exiles, "25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be cleansed of all your pollution. I will cleanse you of all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove your stony heart from your body and replace it with a living one, 27 and I will give you my spirit so that you may walk according to my regulations and carefully observe my case laws." Water and Spirit, right there, in Hebrew prophecy. It is, of course, completely legitimate to understand the reference to water and Spirit as a reference to Baptism, but remember that Jesus has just spoken of the freedom of the Spirit to blow where it will. The point being, I think, that God does the work of cleaning and claiming and renewing and restoring and this is not a new idea— it is deeply rooted in the theology of Israel, and it is foundational to a right understanding of Christian Baptism, too.

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In the verses that follow the potentially harsh question about what Nicodemus doesn't know and doesn't understand, we hear one of the most famous verses in all of Christian scripture- For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him won't perish, but will have eternal life. You probably have it memorized in the King James, whosoever believe that... There is probably no verse more likely to be plucked from its context than this one. I'd like to draw your attention to what comes immediately before and after thus verse. Right before v. 16 are two verses that can be rather impenetrable, "14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up 15 so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life." First, do you see that v.16 echoes v.15? I used to gloss over v. 14 because, what? Holding up a snake? That's so weird. But... this week... with the help of my Jewish and Christian scholar guides- I am getting something from it. The story of Moses lifting up the snake in the wilderness comes from Numbers and it is a story of God sending deadly snakes to the unfaithful, complaining Israelites, but also giving a cure for the bite of those snakes — anyone bitten could look at the snake that Moses was holding up and be cured. When Jesus speaks of the human one, or son of man, being lifted up, this is likely a reference to Jesus' crucifixion when he was raised up on a cross on a hill. I think part of what is being suggested here is that we sinful and struggling ones need to look upon the crucified Christ, need to contemplate the horrific effects of human sinfulness, and the lengths to which God was willing to go to demonstrate God's love for us, need to realize the presence of God in the midst of great suffering and sinful injustice, need to realize there's nowhere God's love can't reach. Somehow I think it is only by the gift of the Spirit that one could look at a tortured body on a cross and find salvation there. When in verse 16 we hear that God gave God's only Son... that again is language usually linked to crucifixion. And Jesus says that this self-giving of God is a manifestation of God's love for the kosmos, the universe... As I was saying, there's nowhere God's love can't reach. And lest we miss that the point is God's love... v. 17 reads, "17 God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him." God's purpose in sending Jesus is the salvation of the world, again, the kosmos, the universe, not it's condemnation and judgment.

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I draw your attention to the immediate context of verse 16 because I think when v. 16 is read alone the emphasis is placed on belief. Whosoever believeth... And clearly belief is a crucial component in this passage and in this Gospel as a whole, but I think the weight is actually on God's love. And by the Spirit we are able to give our hearts in trust to the love of God for us and for everybody. That's what belief is... it's not about understanding or intellectual assent, it's about trust, and that to which we give our hearts. This I think is what it means to be born anew or born from above or born of spirit and water— it's about our hearts, about our hearts being strengthened in trust. Jesus suggests that not everyone receives the good news, not everyone gives their heart to the love of God, and that this is manifest in evil actions. Jesus did not come to judge, but those who reject light and love and practice evil, are living in a state of estrangement from God, they are judged by their rejection of the light.

Nicodemus appears twice more in the Gospel of John and it seems to me that he is coming to believe, that he is giving his heart more and more to Jesus, perhaps most fully when he helps to bury Jesus after his death. If, indeed, Nicodemus grew in faith I think it is because he yielded, and listened, and the Spirit blew his way. If you struggle to believe, maybe because of the actions or statements of other Christians, maybe because of pain and struggle in your own life or an awareness of evil afoot in the world, if your heart feels unsteady, I invite you to yield, to pause, to listen, and to let the Spirit blow your way. And if you have fully given your heart to trust in the love of God for the universe, I hope you'll testify to what you have seen and heard, to what you have given your heart. Perhaps it is through your witness that the Spirit might blow into another heart. Wherever you are on the road of faith, remember how important it is to yield, to surrender, to admit you don't have it all figured out, there's much you don't understand, and let God love you just as you are.

Source in addition to scripture that influenced and was cited in this sermon:

Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr. "Episode 323 For God So Loved the World (John 3:1-21)" on their *Bible Worm* podcast, <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-323-for-god-so-loved-the-world-john-31-21/>

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