

## From the Pastor's Desk

### **Nicodemus and a New Consciousness**

It's odd that the story of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus is only found in the Gospel of John, which was the last one written around 90—110 AD, while the earlier Gospels written anywhere between 60 and 85 AD, make no mention of him. Nicodemus is described by John as a Pharisee and part of the Jewish hierarchy. If he would have lived 60-80 years earlier, his colleagues would have been shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!", not "the Jews" as some biblical translations state, which has provoked anti-Semitism in the history of Christianity.

To put this in historical context, the early church, populated mostly by Jewish converts who still valued their involvement with temple and synagogue, had to deal with two devastating events: The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD and their expulsion from synagogue worship around 85 AD. Both forced them to redefine their understanding of worship and how one finds access to the presence of God.

John was writing to those Jewish Christians who were forced by events into a different understanding of their faith. No longer did they perceive God to be confined to the synagogue from which they were expelled or the temple that was destroyed. Their understanding of God and what God wanted of them was being radically altered.

Reading the story within this context prompted some scholars to view Nicodemus as a corporate and symbolic figure, which is why no mention of him is found in the earlier Gospels. He represented members of the Jewish hierarchy and others who were in conflict with the early church.

Notice that Nicodemus came to Jesus "at night" (John 3:1), a symbol of spiritual darkness. It is to the Jewish hierarchy that John's Gospel has Jesus speak these words: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Their response indicates spiritual darkness: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into their mother's womb and be born?" They were unable to see beyond the physical into a new spiritual dimension Jesus came to reveal.

Author John Spong states: "Nicodemus is clearly a symbol of those in the synagogue, even in the hierarchy of the synagogue, who while impressed with Jesus could never take that final step into what the author of this gospel believed was the transformative Christ experience. He was thus one who preferred the darkness to the light, so John has him come to Jesus "by night". Darkness and night are powerful images for this gospel writer, and they are always contrasted with light and day."

"The Fourth Gospel—Tales of a Jewish Mystic", p. 86

The Gospel states that unless one is born from above they cannot enter into the "Kingdom" of God. The Greek word is "basileus", which can also be translated "realm"

of God. Spong indicates that “Kingdom” denotes a spatial location, while “realm” indicates a new level of consciousness whereby one is able to see beyond the limits of physical vision.

With this in mind, “born from above” or “born again” is not about receiving a new religious status where one is “saved” and worthy to enter heaven after death. Rather, John is writing about a new dimension of consciousness that a person enters on this side of the grave.

Because these Jewish leaders were locked in literalism, John has Jesus clarify to Nicodemus: “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it but do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” John 3:5-7

To be “born of water” is to be born into a physical life in this world when the maternal waters in the womb burst and a baby is born. To be “born of the spirit” is to move into a new dimension of life, a new spiritual consciousness. Placing both “water” and “spirit” together indicates this happens on this side of the grave, and like the wind’s movement, it is a mysterious experience.

Unless Nicodemus is willing to undergo a transformative experience and escape his self-imposed religious boundaries, he will not enter into the realm of God found in Christ. He (the Jewish hierarchy and others in the synagogue) preferred God stay in a predictable shoebox where they had a sense of security and control.

Martin Luther found himself in a similar situation in the sixteenth century when Roman Catholicism believed they had God in a shoebox and under the control of a religious hierarchy. The Reformation changed all that and proclaimed that one has unmediated access to God in Christ.

Although we find windows into the mystery of God through scripture, sacrament and prayer, all religions need to be careful not to shoebox God, whether that be in the Bible, Torah, Quran, a Pope or anything else. Our human desire to feel secure and have control makes us vulnerable to religious fundamentalism. Nicodemus resides in all of our hearts but an appreciation for mystery keeps him at bay.

The book of Exodus records that when Moses asks God his name, God responds: “I am who am” Exodus 13:13-14, which is to say that human categories are unable to express the mystery of God.

“The wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it but do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” John 3:8