

In the Dark

John 3:1-17, Romans 4: 15-17

March 20 (Lent 2)

Let's imagine that scholars have found an important document from around the year 32 CE. Think how excited they'd be! The earliest letters of Paul date from the 60s, and the earliest copies we have of them are later than that. This would be quite a find. The letter is address to one Benjamin, but more interesting to Biblical scholars is the name of the author of the letter. It is signed "Nicodemus." I have a copy of it, and will read it to you.

*To my dear friend Benjamin, Grace to you and peace from the only wise God.*

*I hope this letter finds you in good health, and that all your family is well. It has been some time since we last saw you in Jerusalem. We pray for your speedy and safe return.*

*I am pleased that you also are concerned about this Jesus of Nazareth. Like you, I have been following his movements and his teachings and, in spite of the opinion of some of our colleagues, I haven't made up my mind about him. I decided to take your advice and visit him, to find out about him first hand. I was sure that, if I could meet him away from the crowds and ask him a few pointed questions, I could get to the truth about him. As you will see from my account, it wasn't that simple.*

*I begin in what a thought was a gracious and complementary manner. "We know, I said, " that you are a teacher who has come from God."*

*Now Benjamin, anyone else would have said, "Why thank you Nicodemus, what a lovely complement!" Not Jesus: He didn't even acknowledge my words. Instead he launched into a confusing new teaching. "I tell you truly, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew." At least I think that's what he meant. Now that particular Greek word can be translated either "anew" (or again) or "from above." Either way it doesn't make sense. I of course asked the obvious question, "How can a person be born again--there's no way an adult human being can climb in mom's womb again!"*

*His reply seemed to indicate some new kind of baptismal ritual: "You need to be born of water and the spirit " As you know Benjamin, the Greek word, as well as the Hebrew word for spirit also means wind. Jesus went on to remind me, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound, but you can't tell where it comes from or where it goes."*

*By this time I was really confused. Was he saying that obeying the law had nothing to do with entering God's kingdom? Was he saying this wind/spirit blew on sinners as well as the righteous? So I tried once more to get an explanation*

*"How can these things be?" You will be surprised to learn, Benjamin, that that is the last thing I said. I, who am known to be adept at discussion and debate, was speechless.*

The fragment ends at that point. We don't know what else Nicodemus told his friend about the encounter.

Nicodemus appears twice more in the gospel. Once he is defending Jesus. The other time he comes laden with spices for Jesus' burial. So perhaps he doesn't remain in the dark.

I feel as much in the dark as Nicodemus when I try to think what it means to be born from above, born of the spirit. It's become almost a slogan, hasn't it? A teacher of religion once said to me, "Many Christians talk about being born again as if it's like getting your hand stamped at Magic Mountain so you can get in and out." Many folks who use the phrase, "born again," have flattened its meaning by emphasizing a decision-for-Christ that results in a new birth. They focus on OUR action.

"Born from above" comes from a different direction. Just as babies do not decide to be born, Christians aren't the ones to make the important decision. God is the primary one who decides. God is the one who acts.

I have three ideas to share with you about this. First, I think the phrase "born again Christian" is redundant--all Christians are born again. Some of us remember our new birth, and some of us don't, but we have all been born of the spirit. Two weeks ago I met little Lorence Karange. At the time he was only three days old. As most of you know, his mother and father are beloved members of this church. Lorence won't remember his birth. Just so, some of us who were raised in the church may not remember our spiritual birth--we may not be able to point to just the moment when it happened. But if we trust in God and believe in Jesus we have been born again/born from above.

Second, our being born again/born from above is just the beginning of the story. Little Lawrence has already begun learning. He has learned to suck, before too long he'll learn drink from a glass, and to eat, then to walk. He'll know the pain of teething. Our being born of the spirit is the same way, once we've been born we have much to learn about trusting and loving God and forgiving others. Our growing up as Christians, our journey of faith is a lifelong process. Think about Abraham. God chose him. There's no indication that Abraham did anything in particular to deserve God's favor. But God said, "Go, and I will bless you. and Abraham began his journey of faith.

Third, we will never completely understand, much less be able to tame, this spirit that has given us birth. Like Nicodemus, we find that it doesn't fit into our preconceived categories. It blows where it wills. Next week we will be

considering next chapter of John in which the spirit takes Jesus and the disciples into Samaria, among people who make the disciples decidedly uncomfortable. The spirit blows where it wills.

Just in case you think I've been too hard on evangelicals by pointing out that being born again/born from above is a more difficult and complicated matter than one might think, and by saying that it is just the beginning of the difficult road of discipleship, let me point out that there are others among us who have even more in common with Nicodemus. We find ourselves in the dark in a different way.

Remember Nicodemus came to Jesus as a teacher. He wanted to learn. As a good Pharisee He wanted to ask questions about the law and how to obey it. And Jesus finally says, "You don't need a teacher Nicodemus, following the law, being good isn't the most important thing. You need God's son."

Jesus reminds Nicodemus of an event from Israel's history. During their trek through the wilderness, the Israelites had complained to God and as a consequence were invaded by poisonous snakes. When they repented God told Moses to fashion a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who had been bitten had only to look at the bronze figure to be cured. "Just so," Jesus says to Nicodemus, "I'll be lifted up and anyone who looks to me will be saved. He's saying that the most important thing is recognizing and accepting that God loves him. For God so loved the world that God he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

God loves the world. God loves us. When I was in my twenties, my good friend and I stayed up late talking about our lives and our failures and our hopes. I said to her, "You know all about me, and you love me anyway." "Of course," she replied. And my husband, who knows me even better, still loves me. God loves us much, much more than that. Can we believe this?

Yes, we can err by being too simplistic about what it means to be born anew/ born from above, because that is only the beginning of our life of faith. But we can err even more by not taking seriously God's amazing and overwhelming love for us--that resulted in the gift of Jesus. We can err by thinking we have to somehow earn God's love and God's favor. The love, the acceptance, the believing, the being born comes first. All that we do--all our lessons in forgiveness and trust and trying to be open to God and to please God, come, after, come as a result of the gift of God's son and God's spirit. God has provided the light and once we're not in the dark anymore, then we can begin to walk as children of the light.

Thanks be to God!