

Born From Above

By Rev. Jessica Gregory

John 3:1-8

May 31, 2015~Trinity Sunday

One of the many joys and challenges of talking with a child is that you never know what question they might ask. I have heard more than one family share that their children's questions about God are what brought them to church. Here is a sampling of such questions: Dear God, I am American. What are you?... Dear God, could you put another holiday in between Christmas and Easter? There is nothing good in there now... Dear God, Instead of letting people die and making new ones why don't you just keep the ones you've got now?

Each of us, at some level, can answer these questions. Our cognitive development, our education and our experiences empower us with knowledge and wisdom that children don't yet have.

Children move in the world and question it based on their limited understanding. It is through their sometimes what seems like relentless questioning (the year Nathan was three I wished I could ban him from using the word why) that children develop and grow. Throughout our lives, questioning the world around us, refusing to accept things as they are, enriches our lives as much if not more than the answers to those questions.

As education theorist and writer Neil Postman said, "All our knowledge results from questions, which is another way of saying that questioning is our most important intellectual tool."

Nicodemus' actions in our Scripture passage for today demonstrate that he believed in the power of asking questions. Nicodemus, a respected leader of the Jews, is a smart man. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest governing body of the Jewish people, which was composed of priests (the Sadducees), Scribes (the Pharisees) and lay elders of the aristocracy. These seventy members were the elite of society and were well educated in the rabbinic scholarship of the Old Testament.

Nicodemus goes to Jesus recognizing that he is a "teacher who has come from God" and out of respect and a desire to learn.

He goes *despite* the fact that he is a member of the Sanhedrin and Jesus is the leader of the Christian Jews, a group with who the Jews are in major conflict. And so "Nicodemus came to Jesus at night". Literally, he approaches Jesus with the protection of the darkness surrounding him. Symbolically, he approaches Jesus, in "dark" ignorance, not understanding the spiritual realm of which Jesus speaks. Culturally, he approaches a rabbi at night, the time customarily set aside for studying the Law.

Nicodemus goes to Jesus and begins the conversation acknowledging that Jesus is a teacher who has come from God to which Jesus responds, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (John 3:3).

Nicodemus, not understanding this statement, responds with honest questions: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4).

Nicodemus is an Old Testament scholar. He has studied the Law extensively. But for all of this knowledge he is ignorant in understanding the spiritual dimension of the kingdom of God Jesus is talking about.

His questions illustrate Nicodemus’ faithful attempts to understand Jesus, albeit it on a very literal level. The two are speaking on completely different planes, which results in misunderstanding.

This misunderstanding is not a consequence of Nicodemus’ laziness but rather a consequence of Jesus’ teachings that are based in the spiritual realm, expanding Jewish people’s knowledge of who God is. As one commentator writes, “Nicodemus and the Sanhedrin fit Jesus into what they already know from their interpretation of the Law of Moses” (46 Zachman 2009). Nicodemus’ courage to ask the questions is the catalyst for his belief in Jesus as God’s Messiah to begin to grow. Even as he asks, he is in the process of being born from above himself.

He is in the process of becoming a child of God born anew, as it’s described in the first chapter of John:

“But to all who received Jesus, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born not of blood or the will of flesh or the will of man but of God” (1:12-13).

Nicodemus is a character we find only in John and we find him three times. This is his first appearance with Jesus. He is alone and it is nighttime. The next time he is with other leaders of the Sanhedrin and he defends Jesus when authorities want to arrest him, with a very powerful question: “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?”

Finally, he joins Joseph of Arimathea as Jesus is carried from the cross to the tomb:

“Nicodemus...also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices of linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.” (John 19: 39-40).

Scripture describes Joseph of Arimathea as “a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews...” John Calvin judges Nicodemus by the fact that he is with Joseph after Jesus’ death. He calls Nicodemus also a disciple of Jesus, one who was afraid of the Jews.

Nicodemus’ discipleship with Jesus began at night when he asks those very literal questions “How can anyone be born again after once growing old?

Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” With these questions Nicodemus shows willingness to expand his knowledge of God; openness to Jesus’ teaching so new and foreign to him and the possibility that he may become a believer.

A funny line that is often told in seminary does not paint Jesus’ disciples in a good light. Particularly in the gospel of Mark, this group of followers never seems to get it. The men are

devout in their following – many leave their homes immediately to go with Jesus; but they do not, like Nicodemus, always understand Jesus’ teachings. For this reason, they are referred to as the DUH ciples.

I find this description comforting. If the first disciples of Jesus had trouble understanding him and living life as he taught, then it’s okay that I struggle with my questions. To tweak Neil Postman’s quote to fit our faith life: All our faith results from questions, which is another way of saying that questioning is our most important spiritual growth tool."

The distinction of our faith life is that it is a life of relationship with God, and the questions we ask are to God. Today, on Trinity Sunday, we celebrate the TRI UNITY of our God. We celebrate our God Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the communal life of God.

God the Father is with the Son who is with the Spirit who is with the Father. There is an ever flowing connection that unites these three parts of our God.

This connectivity is what God yearns for in our relationship with him as well. We are born from above not because of anything we do but because of who God is: “But to all who received Jesus, who believed in his name he gave power to become children of God.” *He gave power to become Children of God.*

This brings us to Jesus’ spiritual, symbolic response to Nicodemus’ literal questions: “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 say to you, you must be born from above. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:5-8).

We are born of the Spirit in God’s time and God’s way, not our own: “the wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” Our rebirth is not in our hands, it is a gift from God that we can only receive.

Sharing our questions with Jesus does not result in that gift; sharing our questions with Jesus helps us to fully receive the gift of rebirth.

You may be wondering... With all the pressures and distractions of our everyday lives—work deadlines, responsibilities at home, money to pay the bills, money for retirement, health concerns, racial conflict and flooding disasters in our country and news of wars, destruction and death worldwide – why spend time asking Jesus questions??

Because our hope in navigating through these uncertain and turbulent times is found in our belief in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior... And this belief is strengthened through our questioning Jesus and being open to the hearing the answer. He can handle our questions. We can ask, why is there so much hate in our world? What do we need to do to make your kingdom more present on earth? How do you handle the extraordinary heart-break of so many of your children hurting and dying? Our hope is found in our belief in the Holy Spirit’s powerful presence with us. We celebrated, through the sharing of Kimberly and Michael, the coming of the Holy Spirit in our individual lives and how it works to transform us. Today we celebrate our triune God, ever

present with us and ever yearning to know us more. The best way to get to know God better is to ask Jesus questions and to have your ears and eyes open for the answer.

God is with us, and one of the best ways we can know this is to relate to Jesus. Ask away. Even if you don't understand the answer, your question will bring you closer in the process of being born from above. Let it be and may it be so.

Work Cited

Zachman, Randall C. 2009 "John 3:1-17 Theological Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word: Year B Volume 3*. 44-46.