

BE BORN FROM ABOVE

The Rev. Anne F. C. Richards
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Matthew 3:13-17

Today's gospel is the source of one of Christianity's most famous buzz phrases: "You must be born again." Take a close look at the text and you will see that that is not what Jesus said at all. It's closer to how Nicodemus misunderstands what Jesus said, but as Shakespeare said, "There is no error so gross but that some sober brow will bless it with a proper text." Being born again is a great thing, but it's not what Jesus is talking about in this story.

But let's begin at the beginning. Why has Nicodemus come to talk with Jesus? What has happened that makes him to do this? If you look at John, chapter 2, at the passage that immediately precedes today's gospel, you will see the story of the so-called cleansing of the temple. We're at the very beginning of John's story of Jesus. All Jesus has done so far is call a few disciples and turn water into wine at a wedding. And then he stages a major scene at the temple and gets himself in big trouble. What is he doing?

Remember that the cleansing of the temple was not really about the fact that the Jews had made it a marketplace in the way that we understand that with modern ears. This is not about whether or not to allow bingo in church basements, or where the proceeds from May Fair go. Which is not to say that Jesus was not concerned about financial practices at the temple. In order to make a sacrifice at the temple, you had to buy a sacrificial animal or bird from the temple

itself. And to do so, you had to use temple currency. And there was an exchange rate to do that that was often exorbitant, making it impossible for the poor to make sacrifices, which left them outside the official system of forgiveness.

This enraged Jesus. But he saw it as a sign of a much larger problem: that his entire religion had become corrupt, unfaithful to its vocation from God to be a blessing to the nations and to bring the whole world to the knowledge and love of God. First-century Judaism was exclusivist, inward-turning, and self-satisfied. It was also addicted to nationalistic violence and to what Jesus knew was a wrong-headed understanding of both national and personal redemption. And so with a whip he acts out his judgment on the institution of his own religion. And after he does it, he hints that **he** is the new temple, and that that new temple is in effect indestructible. Unbelievable. Most people probably thought he was a raving maniac.

But others were not so sure. Chapter 2 ends with these interesting verses: "When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone."

And then Nicodemus appears. He is a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews. As a leader,

he knows what has happened the other day at the temple. He knows too that while many oppose Jesus, many others believe in him. Jerusalem is crowded with pilgrims for the Passover. The Romans will be in lock-down mode to make sure the masses stay under foot. He knows how explosive the situation is. This is potentially like Tahrir Square in Cairo a few weeks ago. A tinderbox.

And so perhaps – perhaps - Nicodemus's fellow members of the Sanhedrin send him to Jesus to try to get a bead on him. Notice that he calls Jesus "Rabbi," a term of respect of course, but also "Rabbi" is what everyone in John's gospel who does not believe in Jesus calls him. And Nicodemus speaks in an official way. See how he tries to maneuver Jesus into line: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God..." He speaks not only for himself, but for the religious establishment. "We know." And he tells Jesus who he is: You are a teacher; you are not a temple. And he goes further: "No one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Now there is some graciousness in these words, but what Nicodemus is really doing is telling Jesus who Jesus is based on the Pharisees' understanding of who God is.

For first-century Jews, God was a God of signs. This was in large part what their tradition was constructed of: a belief that the God who ruled and guided them made known his care for them through history by way of signs: the rainbow after the flood, the plagues during the time of slavery in Egypt; the pillars of cloud and fire during the exodus, the manna in the wilderness, the performative gestures or acted-out parables of the prophets, and many others, including perhaps even the temple itself, which was believed by the Jews to house the very presence of God, in the Holy of Holies.

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

I don't know about you, but I hear a clear message there. It's this: "Listen, my friend, you have a certain standing with the people on account of your charisma and what you've been able to pull off so far. Water into wine at that on-the-cheap wedding last week? Nice. But keep in mind, you are a teacher, no more than that. You stand within our tradition. God is present in the temple, we know that. So no more talk about destroying the temple, please. There is nothing new under the sun. Watch your step."

And so Nicodemus tries to shrink Jesus down to the size of his own religious imagination. Which is why Jesus responds so strongly: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" and "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." In other words, "You can't be in relationship with God if you are stuck in the visible." Just by virtue of being human, we are all in the flesh. We are each born from within certain traditions and we can never completely shake them off. But Jesus reminds us that even our most revered traditions partake of the flesh – because even though they convey the holy, they are stuck in time and history and culture. Traditions are like the stones of the temple – they house the divine, but they are not indestructible, they are still subject to misuse and decay. And so in that respect tradition partakes of death itself.

I think this is why Jesus always refuses to give a sign, even when people beg him for one because they want something visible. One of his more vehement responses to the demand for a sign are these words: "An evil

and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.” His death and resurrection are the only signs he will give.

Spirit is different. It’s like the wind in so many ways. It is invisible. It both creates and destroys. We cannot control it. It is always moving and changing. Your Mom gave birth to you once. That was your birth in the flesh. You can’t change that. To be born from above means seeing that God is always giving birth to you. Every day, every moment, you are becoming, changing, moving – whether you acknowledge it or not. And this means that life is filled with mystery and ambiguity and adventure. Because God is not bound by the flesh, by tradition, which in some sense always limits us because it tries to maintain the status quo.

When I first came to St Mark’s I led a Monday morning class around a book called “The Price of Privilege” by a psychologist named Madeline Levine. In the book, she speaks so poignantly and directly about the dangers of living in and raising kids in communities like New Canaan, where affluence is more or less the rule. Of how there is a kind of lockstep that you can begin to fall into when there are so-called established community norms and ideals and traditions around achievement and income and possessions, how all this can tempt us into losing our humanity, which is maybe the greatest sin of all. There isn’t a town in the country that doesn’t have its dangers, but in the 3 years I’ve been here, I’ve talked with many, many kids and adults who have corroborated what Madeline Levine says in her book. We can become so embedded in our lives and what we think we “have” to do

and we are always surprised when well into the game, we are condemned by our ideals and our goals because we can never completely measure up to them. And we can become suffused with regret that somehow we have missed our lives. We forget that God is like the wind! Life is like the wind! And the future is open. Because as today’s epistle says, we believe in the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” There is no script. Every moment is a new creation. Life itself is forgiving. This is what Jesus died to give us.

One of the great gifts that comes from being a Christian is freedom. Once in awhile, people come along who know that gift and use it. I just finished reading the new biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer by Eric Metaxas. It’s a story about a person who really understood what being born from above means. As you know, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor and theologian in Germany during the Second World War. One of the most interesting things about him is that he came from a non-church-going family. They were Christians, but they never went to church – they thought it was boring. And so when Dietrich was a teenager and announced his plan to study theology, his family was puzzled. His brothers were contemptuous. Why would he want to give his life to an institution that was filled with banal, bourgeois people? (I’m quoting here).

He went ahead and did it anyway, and he became the most brilliant theologians of his time and one of the most dedicated pastors of his time. He saw the tremendous power of the church to be a reconciling force in the world, which eventually led him to a crisis of conscience in regard to the racist path that Germany was taking under Adolf Hitler. As you know, after much soul-searching, he

joined the plot to assassinate Hitler. (I was talking with one of our parishioners, Martzi Eidelberg, the other day about this and the analogy she used to describe Bonhoeffer's decision about the plot was that of a crazy person behind the wheel of a car who is careening around smashing into people: You don't simply mop up the blood and console the victims; you get your hands on the guy behind the wheel and stop him.)

Dietrich was eventually arrested and put into a concentration camp, and then after that a small prison. He was actually arrested not for his part in the assassination plot. He was arrested because the authorities had discovered his role in the successful escape of seven Jews into Switzerland. And so he expected to be able to talk his way out of prison eventually.

But this was not to be. As the Allies and the Russians closed in on the Germans, Hitler began stepping up his attempt to snuff out his enemies. Three weeks before the war ended, Dietrich was condemned to death.

It was a Sunday. He and about twelve others in the prison had gathered in the morning and they had asked Dietrich to lead a small worship service. They were all in good spirits, because they had been shuttled around so much they thought they were close to being released. After the prayers were done, three men came into the room and said, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us."

Those three words – "Come with us" – I guess you could say they were a sign. Everyone knew what they meant. It was over. As he left his friends, he said to them, "This is the end. But for me, it is the beginning."

Dietrich was led to a small room, where he was given a few moments to himself. He prayed. He was then stripped, just like our Lord, and then led out to a yard where a gallows had been erected. He knelt down at the foot of the gallows and again he prayed out loud. He stepped onto the gallows, the cord was put around his neck, and five seconds later he was dead. His body was discarded.

"This is the end. But for me, it is the beginning." This is the Christian life – filled with love and freedom, no matter what happens, right to the end and through the end.

I wonder sometimes about Nicodemus. He comes back two more times in John's gospel. He suggests that Jesus deserves a proper trial. And after Jesus' death, he brings a hundred pounds of aloe and myrrh for the women to use in the embalming of Jesus' body. He does the proper thing, the decent thing. But I wonder if he regretted not coming any closer to Jesus himself while Jesus was alive. One scholar says that at least he wasn't like Judas. Judas moved from the light into the darkness. Nicodemus moved from the darkness toward the light. And because Jesus knew what was in everyone, he challenged Nicodemus to come in further toward that light. But Nicodemus stayed on the margin. He couldn't quite get there.

We have a choice too. Soon, the Son of Man will once again be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights. Let him do what he came to do. Let him set you free to be born from above. Be like Dietrich. Let your life be a beginning.

Amen.