

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The 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."

⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

John 3: 1-21

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Looking Again at "Born Again": Literalism Unmasked

This is a tough scripture today. First of all, it's easy to sympathize with Nicodemus. It was a confusing conversation he had with Jesus.

But even more problematic for us here today, at King's Chapel, we likely recoil from a lesson about being "born again," because we know how that phrase is most often interpreted today.

But hang in there, because the story of Nicodemus is important – maybe even life changing.

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Admittedly, the story doesn't start out well. What in the world *is* Jesus talking about?

Jesus starts by talking about being born, and he uses words that have multiple meanings. He might be saying we need to be born a *second time*, or born *anew*, or born *from above*. But what would those things mean -- being born from the womb again? Being born from somewhere above? Where above?

Nicodemus – understandably -- opts for the most literal meaning: that we need to be born from the womb again, but that *isn't* what Jesus means. Literalism can cause us problems.

Even after Jesus gets more clear, and keeps repeating, "You need to be born *from the Spirit*," the word Jesus uses for Spirit has multiple meanings, too – it's a word that can mean wind or breath or spirit. The *wind* blows where it will, or the *spirit* blows or the *breath*... *Whose breath?* What's going on? Of course Nicodemus is confused.

All of us probably *are* Nicodemus, when it comes to sorting out the big questions of our lives. We don't figure out what's going on right away. And a literal interpretation won't get us where we need to go.

But hang in there with this story of Nicodemus, confusing as it is at the outset. Because it is hugely important, and not for the reasons you might think.

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We probably shouldn't be surprised by the language Jesus chose. Through all time, those who have taught humankind about that which is most meaningful, of deepest importance in our lives, almost always teach through metaphors: word pictures. Throughout literature from every culture, we find metaphors like the ones Jesus is using with Nicodemus.

Often it's a journey metaphor. Odysseus in The Iliad and The Odyssey, leaving home to journey far away and ultimately returning, a changed and wiser man.

"Gilgamesh travelling to the ends of the earth, searching for a solution to his mortality. The Knights of the Round Table riding into the forest on their quest, the Buddha as he leaves the comfort of his father's palace..." -- all journeys as metaphors for life's greatest searches.¹

Lent itself, this 6-week span we're in prior to Easter, is said to be time for "an inward journey."

So just as with all great world traditions, in the Bible we read of life journeys, too.

The first book, Genesis, tells of Abraham and Sarah, leaving home to journey far away, across vast desert wilderness, in search of something better, something promised by God.

The second book, Exodus, tells of the journey out from Pharaoh's Egypt, back through desert wilderness, home to the promised land.

In the New Testament, Jesus travels from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Each journey metaphor is about leaving something behind, in order to find something better. To find rebirth.

In Genesis, for Abraham and Sarah, it's the improbable birth a baby son, Isaac. And from him, a new tribe of people is born, called the Israelites.

In Exodus, it's a journey from slavery into freedom. The tribe becomes a nation, who lives in a new way, under new commandments, in a new land.

For Jesus traveling to Jerusalem, it's a journey towards death, but then astonishing rebirth, too – called "resurrection." For his friends, who thought he was gone, they become convinced new life is possible for them, also. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell Jesus' journey, then the rest of the New Testament books tell the apostles' journeys, around the Mediterranean Sea, spreading the good news.

Journey metaphors: leaving something behind, to start a new life, to give birth to something new, something even better than what we left.

There are other metaphors, too, aren't there?

Birth metaphors. A little mustard seed that sprouts up into a huge bush. A single grain of wheat, planted in darkness, then reborn into a stalk of grain covered in plentiful seeds. Much from little, if we'll let go of that seed.

Darkness and light metaphors. The blind receive new sight. Nicodemus, coming under cover of darkness, to receive enlightenment. All metaphors.

But Nicodemus is a literalist. "Do I have to go back into my mother's womb?"

Take the journey, says Jesus. From darkness into light, through wilderness towards promises met, into death that becomes rebirth!

Be born afresh! It's possible.

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Do the metaphors apply to you?

Is there some new way you'd like to be as a person – a little more kind, a little less fearful?

What's your deepest yearning – for more courage or deeper peace? What do you need to meet the powerful urge you feel, perhaps to change the world. Do you need others with you on the journey?

The place of our greatest longing is different for each of us. But look for the cavern in your life, where all is dim, and imagine a light cast there. Look for the place you're handcuffed, but are offered freedom.

What's the new life you're eager for, that could be birthed within you this Lent?

What's the new life for King's Chapel into which we're invited now? What must we leave behind?

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It's easy to sympathize with Nicodemus, because he'd already been trying his best. He was a thoughtful man, no newcomer to the notion of new beginnings. He'd considered it seriously, both for himself personally and for his people.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and both he and Jesus were leaders of reform movements, unhappy with the way their religion and their society had become corrupt, with a small group of powerful priests at the top, who insisted that payments had to be made to them at the Temple.

Both Nicodemus and Jesus thought religion should be re-vitalized. It's been a recurring theme over the course of human history, with each new reformation or revival. Not just Protestants trying to reform the Roman Catholic Church. But also Buddhists reforming perceived excesses of Hindu traditions. Islam, reforming what they thought had gone wrong in the other monotheisms, Judaism and Christianity.

At the time of Nicodemus and Jesus, reform of Judaism was being attempted.² One effort came from those who sought to escape what they found corrupt and live in solitude. They were the Essenes, who many think hid scrolls of scriptures in jars, the treasure trove of ancient manuscripts discovered last century that we call the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Essenes were like any of us who think wistfully of getting away, on a long retreat. There's a reason Kripaulu is a destination, a reason the Dali Llama glows with a deeply held joy, a reason those of us reading [A Season for the Spirit](#) find remarkable wisdom emanating from the Episcopal monastery across the Charles River, where our author Martin Smith resided.

Some things *can* be re-formed, seen differently, in quiet and solitude and prayer. That was the hope of the Essenes, as their way to reform Judaism during Jesus' time.

The Pharisees had a second program for reform, based on purifying what was corrupt, instead of escaping it. The Pharisees wanted to return to the core of Jewish teachings, just as the Puritans who founded Boston wanted to "purify" the Church of England. To get back to the true roots of Christianity. To live strictly by rules, and banish the excess hoopla of Anglicanism – the rich priestly garb, music, liturgy. Puritans yearned to be "pure" Christians, like the earliest disciples.

For the Pharisees, reform meant taking the so-called "purity" rules -- that had been corrupted in the Temple -- back into individuals' daily lives. It was an effort at being reborn. The Sabbath really would be honored again. The scriptures really would be read and followed. Widows and orphans really would be taken care of.

But any reform effort centered on strict purity laws requires clarity, so people can know what to do and what to avoid. Rules need to be tight, to avoid any "slippery slope" problems. The commandment to rest on the Sabbath becomes "Don't pluck a raspberry to eat while walking down the road, because that's harvesting." "Don't worship idols" becomes, "Don't speak to Gentiles who worship idols." Staying pure means dividing things neatly: some things clean, some dirty. Some *people* are clean, some *people* are dirty. Some people - okay. Some people - damned.

For a Pharisee like Nicodemus, who genuinely thought purity reform was the solution, Jesus' third, alternative reform movement, was radical and horrifying. Jesus ate with filthy people: corrupt tax workers and prostitutes. Jesus touched lepers. He talked to women, even when they were bleeding.

Jesus didn't agree with the core proposition of the purity movement – the two-worlds notion: the pure versus the impure, the in's versus the out's. "God doesn't want to condemn people," Jesus tells Nicodemus. "God wants people to thrive. *All* of them." "I came not to condemn the world, but to save it."

"Nicodemus," says Jesus, "God loves the world so much – the whole creation, everything and everyone in it, *so much!*..."

"You see, Nicodemus, for God so loves the world that..."

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Ah. Now we're at John 3:16. Did you catch it? "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son that whosoever believes in him..."

John 3:16 – the words of the Introit sung by our choir, printed at the top of your Order of Service.

3:16 - the emblematic numbers written in the eye black under football quarterback Tim Tebow's eyes, to publicly proclaim his Christianity every time the cameras pan his face.

John 3:16 - the verse number written on signs that Born Again Christians hold up in the football end zones whenever an extra point or field goal is kicked, so that the verse is broadcast to all watching.

Now we're right at the crux of the problem many of us have with today's story of Nicodemus. It's not just that the Nicodemus story is confusing. It's that the Nicodemus story is misused when it's taken literally, and out of context. It's the same mistake Nicodemus himself made when he was a literalist. Because it is misused when the phrase "born again" and the verse from John 3:16 are used to draw a stark dividing line through the world again, marking who is in and who is out. Who is saved and who is damned. Who is a real Christian, and who will be left behind in the Rapture.

But hang in there, because there's something important for us in the Nicodemus story, too.

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Theologian Marcus Borg reclaims John 3:16 and the lessons about being "born again," explaining that they cannot be read literally, using surface level understandings of the English translation in the way so many do today. His new book, out in 2012, is called Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored.³ I commend it to you. Borg has two succinct chapters on "born again" and John 3:16.

John 3:16 – there at the top of your Order of Service - means that God loves *all* of creation *so much* that God is willing to dwell right within it, right among us impure humans, right within human Jesus, even within us.

And the word "believe"- in the phrase, "those who *believe* in him" – comes from *credo*, which means what you give your life to, your heart to. *Credo* is not about what words you recite, or the theology you espouse. It's about who you choose to journey with through life, who you choose as your life teacher. It's about how you *act*, not what you *say*.

Do you ally yourself with those striving to be as compassionate to others as God is compassionate to us? Because in Hebrew and Aramaic – the language of Jesus – “compassion” is the plural of the noun that means *womb*.⁴ In the Hebrew scriptures, God is seen like a womb – giving life, nurturing, compassionate. A woman feels compassion for the child of her own womb. A man feels compassion for his brother from the same womb.

Compassion is a deep feeling; not a creed in the head, but passionate caring in the gut – where the womb is. When we're compassionate, we feel another's suffering *in our guts*. We feel it viscerally. And so we act to help.

That's what born again is – knowing we all come from God's womb, and therefore acting to care for one other, siblings of the same womb.

That's the imagery being conveyed by Jesus to Nicodemus. That we are all one, all sisters, all brothers. And seeing *that*, we will we act on it.

It's more than “mercy” – as when we say, “God have mercy on us.” Mercy is given from the position of a superior, offering mercy down. Compassion is alongside – “with.”

Even in the English etymology, it's com-*passion*. Passion, meaning feeling. And Com, meaning with, as in com-*munion* and com-*munity* – having union *with*. So God is compassionate, feeling *with* us, alongside us, when we suffer.

The Nicodemus story teaches *the antithesis* of purity laws that divide us into acceptable and unacceptable – whether it's the Pharisaic worldview of pure/impure, or some Christians' worldview today, of the saved versus the damned. There are *not* some who are adequately Christian and all others who fail, says Jesus.

Rather, all of us are beloved community.

And we can experience that now, not just later in heaven. When Jesus says those who give their heart to God can have “everlasting life”, we think of heaven later, but in John's gospel Jesus is speaking of “the life of the age to come” – God's kingdom on earth. It's a kingdom that will be fulfilled later, yes, but God's kingdom on earth is also a present life we can taste *in part* now. Life as it is meant to be.

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Life as it is meant to be – available now? Is that promise real?

It's easy to have sympathy for Nicodemus, because it's hard for *anyone* to trust God's complete embrace of us already, *especially* when we're all so enmeshed

in a world view that divides us up, every single day: the pure from the impure, the cool people and losers, the beautiful people in Times ads and the rest of us. It's hard to trust in Jesus' vision when the world is constantly divided between rich and poor, Americans and all others. It's hard when like Nicodemus, we've learned to work very hard to stay on the "okay" side of the dividing line.

Like Nicodemus, it's hard to get our minds around Jesus' way of thinking, where we're all acceptable, already. We hear him, but we're disoriented. Confused. Uncertain. But like Nicodemus, we're also intrigued enough that we keep coming back.

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Because Nicodemus does come back. He shows up again twice in the Gospel of John.

After Jesus gets to Jerusalem, and is being condemned by the Pharisees, it's Nicodemus who speaks up for Jesus, reminding other the furious Pharisees of their own rule, that they must give Jesus a hearing before arresting him. Despite the antipathy Nicodemus raises in his fellow Pharisees, he speaks up. Something still draws Nicodemus to the light that seems to flow from this man Jesus and his message.

And then, at the very end of the gospel, it's Nicodemus who takes the dead, limp body down from a cross, and with another man, anoints it with 100 pounds of rich spices and creams, and wrapping it in linen, places the body in a grave on Good Friday evening, just before the Sabbath starts.

By touching the dead body, Nicodemus becomes impure. And I think, reborn.

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For Nicodemus and for us, there's a whole new way of living, without dividing lines. A way to live in touch with the Spirit of Love that is compassionately *for you*, already surrounding you, with you, within you.

We'll likely get dirty, because to live life compassionately with all who suffer, always means life on the hard side. And we'll lose something, too, maybe even our old, comfortable way of seeing the world...or others...or ourselves, a way that used to be so central to who we thought we were. As it had been for the Pharisee Nicodemus.

But hang in there – as Nicodemus did – because there's something here that could utterly change your life. Make you feel like new.

¹ Stephanie Paulsell, Professor of Ministry, Harvard Divinity School, writing in Christian Century, March 10, 2014. <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-02/journey-stories>. I was blessed to take the Journeys Course with Professors Paulsell and Dean William A. Graham, in which these and other books are read.

² Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & The Heart of Contemporary Faith (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), pp. 46-68.

³ Marcus Borg, Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored (Harper One, 2011), pp. 161-169.

⁴ Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & The Heart of Contemporary Faith (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), especially pp. 47, 61.