

One of the things that assures me that most of the stories in the NT are true—or at least, based on actual events, as they say on TV—is the variety of different types of encounters that Jesus had as he went about his ministry. He spoke to large crowds, he spoke to small groups. He spoke to farmers, he spoke to fishermen. He spoke to highly educated folks, he spoke to those who had no education. Perhaps the most unusual encounter he had is the one recorded in our scripture for today—his meeting with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dead of night, asking questions. “Who are you?” you can hear him ask. “Are you for real?” As a renowned teacher of Hebrew scriptures, as well as a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the highest legal, legislative and judicial body of the Jewish faith, these are daring questions for Nicodemus to ask. He’s flirting with heresy here, with accusations of faithlessness and betrayal. Is this why he comes to Jesus in the dark, at night, when no one could see him? Is Nicodemus afraid? Or is it just that he wants some one-on-one time with Jesus, no interruptions please. It isn’t clear what his motivation is for coming in darkness, and maybe that isn’t really important. Maybe what’s really important here is that Nicodemus is there at all. Maybe what’s important is that he’s asking questions, that he’s risking the very foundations of his own faith by coming. Maybe what’s important is that Nicodemus is one more person in a long line of truth-seekers, those people more interested in knowing the truth than remaining faithful to a tradition that doesn’t really work anymore.

Anyway, it’s clear to see that something about Jesus has caught the attention and imagination of Nicodemus. I can imagine that Nicodemus has heard rumblings from his Pharisean colleagues about the things Jesus has been saying around town. He might have even been in the crowd somewhere himself. He’s heard enough to want to ask questions himself. But like many others who seek answers from Jesus, he gets a little more than he bargains for. He gets theology. He gets spirituality. He gets some hard to understand, ambiguous-sounding talk that seems to be intended to confuse rather than enlighten. Nicodemus begins by saying “we know you are a teacher who comes from God because only someone who comes from God can do what you’ve been doing.” It’s clear that Nicodemus is still aligned at this point with the Pharisees, so why does he begin the dialogue like he does? A little attempt at flattery, maybe? Get on Jesus’ good side so he’ll talk? But Jesus answers with a riddle: unless a person is born from above he can’t see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus chooses to take Jesus literally: you mean a person has to go back into his mother? The riddle changes slightly: one must be born of water and the spirit. But Nicodemus is still confused. How can these things be? he asks.

I think most of us today are no less confused about these answers than Nicodemus was. Born from above? Born again? Water and the spirit? Huh?

Several years ago one of the trends in Christianity was based on this passage. People began to speak of being “born again Christians”—even one of our past Presidents, Jimmy Carter, spoke of being “born again”. The idea behind this movement was that people who made a special connection with Christ at some point in their lives, and who in turn dedicated their lives to him, were considered “born again”. Born again as opposed to what, I always wondered. I must say, this phrase caused me more than a little confusion myself, because from the time I was little I believed in Christ. I was fortunate enough to have grown up in the church, knowing about Christ. But because I hadn’t had some special experience in which I explicitly gave my life to Christ I worried that I wasn’t good enough. That I didn’t believe enough or the right way. Even though I went to church and had learned Bible stories and verses and knew in my heart that I believed Jesus to be son of God, I still worried.

Some of you may have heard me say before that I at one time had a personal encounter with Christ, and it’s true. But you know, I’ve never felt comfortable saying that I was “born again”—probably because of all those years of feeling left out or of falling short. Because my faith didn’t change, really.

I didn't work any harder in the church, or read my Bible or pray any more than I did before. What I mainly felt was reassured that I was indeed a child of God, and that God in Christ would love me no matter what. I think I said not too long ago that I felt like I'd fallen in love—and that really was the feeling I had. That I loved and was loved by God. As someone who in the past had some serious self-esteem issues, just knowing that was enough to make me feel like a new person in Christ. I had been part of the body all along, now I felt worthy of being a part of it just because I knew myself to be forgiven and loved. Maybe it's just that I recognized the spirit moving within me in a way I hadn't before.

You know, in a crazy way this begins to make sense. I had been baptized with water as a baby—something I didn't even remember. My parents told me about that event, however, and as I grew up I learned the stories and meanings and practices of the faith—which eventually led me to this realization that the spirit was working within me. Other people I know have had their baptism and their awakening to the spirit much closer together. And there are others out there that seem to have their awakening first—as a seeker, maybe, when a youth or an adult—and be baptized later.

Nicodemus came to Jesus expecting him to do more signs—or at least to say, yes you can believe because the signs say so. Instead Jesus leads him down a road to a deeper awareness of faith—a faith that doesn't rely on signs but on the moving of the spirit deep within the soul. But how can we be sure of the truth claims made by the gospel of Christ? Don't we need some kinds of signs in order for our faith to be strengthened? Why shouldn't miraculous signs, healings, supernatural events and so forth be the basis for our faith?

When Nick was in high school he was in a play called *The Diviners*. The story is of a 14 year old with the mind of a 4 year old, whose mother drowned when he was small. Into the town where he lives came a wanderer, a former preacher who has given up the ministry for because of his doubts. The wanderer stays in the town and befriends the boy and falls in love with his sister.

One of the side-bar characters in this play is a woman named Norma. Norma is a good Christian woman, who reads and memorizes her Bible faithfully. She is unhappy because several years before the town's church burned, and was never rebuilt. Without the building, she thinks, there's no church—no meetings, no singing, no nothing. So when the preacher shows up, she becomes convinced that he is meant to be their new preacher—whether he wants to or not. All through the play she's finding "signs" that God has sent the former preacher to the town—everything from just the fact that he stopped in the town, to an incident in which he helped one of the townfolk up off the ground when she fell off her bike—"he looked deep into her eyes—right through to her soul", to a the sun coming out after a summer storm. In the end rather than being a hero, the preacher is the main actor in a tragedy. I was left at the end of the play wondering, will the woman's faith survive this disappointment?

You see, the problem with looking for signs is, it's too easy to see what we want to see in the sign. It's too easy to confuse happenstance with meaning. But when we have faith in Christ, we don't need to look for signs anymore. We only have to trust. We trust in God to keep the promise of the new covenant—that if we believe in Christ then the separation between ourselves and God will be bridged. We will no longer be separate from God. We are transformed. We have a new beginning, in which we will live as God's people until we leave this earth, and then we'll be in God's holy presence forever.

This is what being born from above means, my friends. It means trusting the promises of God by believing in Christ and following "the Way" of Christ. This is what we are invited to when we hear the gospel story, and this is what it means to say we've been "born again". If we feel a time when we've

been transformed, that's fine, and we can take that as a sign if we want to—but if we are born of water and the spirit, we don't need any other sign to tell us that we have a new life in Christ. Through Christ God is calling us to trust in his forgiving power and imagine ourselves returned to his loving embrace. Amen.