

BORN HOW?

Text: John 3:1-21

A few preliminary comments will aid our hearing of today's scripture from the Gospel of John. Verses of this passage are familiar ones. Today we will listen for the whole context.

This gospel may have its origins in a community drama. It is not difficult to imagine it staged in a small town somewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In the scene just before the one we are about to hear, Jesus and his disciples entered the Temple at Jerusalem and drove out the moneychangers with the famous whip of cords. This scene of mayhem in the Temple precincts is the main "sign" referred to in the passage we will hear. Keep it in mind as the context and backdrop.

The passage also makes reference to the snake that Moses lifted up in the wilderness. This evokes one of the stories from the wilderness wandering of the Hebrew people. They were in a snake-infested territory and poisonous snakebites were a problem, and the people were very fearful. Moses asked God what to do, and God instructed him to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Those who were bitten were instructed to focus on the image of the snake. The effect of the poison would be alleviated and they would live.

There is also an essential detail that cannot be translated. The word in Greek that means "again" also means "from above."

The scene we are about to hear takes place at night. So imagine yourself in the audience on a dark night in a small village. Remember that there is no electricity.

On improvised stage is the actor who plays Jesus. He sits in the light of a small fire, perhaps, or a torch or lamp so that he is lit and everything else is in darkness. Nicodemus enters and comes into the light with Jesus.

So let us, together, listen for the word of God for us in this reading.

Text: John 3:1-21

Are you born again?

Do some of you remember a few years back—decades actually—when the airports in this nation were alive with young people competing for the souls of weary travelers? Hare Krishnas with their colorful books—and the so-called Jesus Freaks. Lo, these many years ago, when I was in my twenties, I was on my way through O'Hare Airport in Chicago, and I was accosted with this question by one of the Jesus variety. "Are you born again?"

He did not ask: "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" That would have allowed too much time for fast walkers to escape, so he asked this abbreviated question, "Are you born again?" He had managed to look me in the eye. I felt obligated to answer.

Now in all my previous encounters with these airport evangelists, answering “No,” had invited an unwanted effort to convert me. I thought answering, “Yes” might be the password out of this morass. It was worth a try, anyway, so I looked him right back in the eye and said, “Yes, I am.”

This was clearly not the password. It only tripped another question in the script. “What was the date?” he replied. An answer, remarkably, came out of my mouth in an instant. “October 27th, 1952.” He did the calculation quickly in his mind, “Is that your birth date?” he said, with a tone that implied that I stood accused of deception. “Yes, it is,” I answered. “That’s not what it means to be born again ...” He was still talking when I walked away considering in my own mind why the first birth was enough ... being raised in a family and church that nurtured a faith that did not depend on a dramatic conversion on a specific date. I dismissed this young man, and he dismissed me to move on to accost someone else with his question, “Are you born again?”

There we have the modern encounter about the interpretation of today’s reading from the Gospel of John—the encounter of two self-righteous young twits in O’Hare airport.

“Born again?” or “Born once?” or “Born how?” What is really the important question here?

Let’s take this encounter back to the scripture passage—a passage some of us fondly designate “Nick at Night.” This scene is the source of the “Born Again” designation promulgated by so many evangelical Christians. It relies, ironically, on Nicodemus’ mis-hearing of Jesus in the passage. Double-meanings are common in the gospel of John. In many scenes, Jesus says something about spiritual matters and his dialogue partner hears it on a literal-physical level, thus propelling the dialogue.

If these scenes in John were originally teaching skits, we can imagine the knowing look that the actor playing Jesus gives the audience, and those in the know among them doing the “wink-wink,” “nudge-nudge” to one another.

So Nicodemus comes onto the improvised stage at night, into the light in which Jesus is visible in the darkness. We watch with the audience. What’s in our minds is the scene from the afternoon, the one in the Temple—Jesus cracking the whip made of knotted ropes, the tables crashing over and the coins flying and ringing on the pavement, the confused doves flying from broken cages, the whites of the eyes of the distressed oxen and sheep and Jesus yelling over the din of the uproar about the corruption of the merchants in the Temple.

Here we are re-gathered after dark for the next scene.

Nicodemus, one of the ruling elite, has presumably witnessed this scene. He comes under cover of darkness, not wanting to be seen doing what he is doing, perhaps afraid of the repercussions of any association with Jesus.¹

The scene opens with his statement that on its face is certainly an effort to make a connection with Jesus: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God because no one can

¹There is more than one way to read this role. We could read him here as a clever investigator from the informal network of the ruling elite, but the role of sincere seeker is probably more consistent with his character as he appears later in the drama in a mediating and supportive role.

do the signs you do unless God is with him.” Nicodemus affirms what Jesus and his disciples have done in the Temple as aligned with God’s purpose, a God-inspired action.

He comes at night to say, “I want you to know—but on the QT—you have supporters among us for what you are doing. We know you are right about the corruption in the Temple.”

Jesus’ initial response affirms Nicodemus as a seeker, Jesus offers a “Yes, and ...” response meant to encourage him, yet there is this little word with the double meaning. What Jesus says, in effect, is, “Yes, Nicodemus, you would not perceive the power of God in these actions, you could not see that God is the real ruler, if you were not begotten from above.”

“From above ...” or “again” (wink-wink, nudge-nudge, Get it?)

Nicodemus is somehow unprepared for this affirmation, or perhaps for the larger implications. He hears more challenge than affirmation. He hears an accusation and an impossible criterion, “Well, Nicodemus, unless you’re born again, you won’t see what God is doing.” Nicodemus hears defensively, and he takes Jesus’ words on a literal-physical level and he responds accordingly, “I’m a grown man. I can’t enter into my mother’s womb to be born a second time, can I? How can I be born again?” He has heard from his own defensiveness. He hears “born again.” So it is indeed ironic that an entire movement in Christianity has been built up around Nicodemus’s defensive mis-hearing of Jesus in this passage.

“Are you born again?” ... back to the scene in the airport ... Does the question grab your defensive impulses, too? Something in the question says to us, as it did to Nicodemus, “I’m in. You’re out. I define the criteria for who’s in. You don’t meet my criteria until your experience matches mine.”

Now we could point to the irony and use it defensively, “What Jesus said was, ‘born from above,’ not ‘born again.’” (More precisely, he said “begotten from above.” That’s a set of issues for another day.) We could even call ourselves, “Born From Above Christians.” How does this fit? “We’re born from above.” Does that sound a little snooty and self-congratulatory? “We have the correct message. We are the Born From Above Christians. We know what the scripture really says.” Now, seriously, is that really the message? Is this the attitude that shows the divine presence in our lives? Would that really indicate that we are “born from above?”

Let me suggest that this posture of defensiveness and counter-attack is part of what the script for Jesus means in his response—“What is begotten of flesh is flesh.”

Among the early Christians, the contrast of Flesh and Spirit stands for two whole ways of being, and certainly being trapped in a defensive posture and the counter-attack is a part of the way of being denoted by the flesh. “What is begotten of flesh is flesh” and trapped in an engagement at the level of self-defense, trapped in a certain pettiness of living.

“What is begotten of spirit is spirit,” and enters into, shares in, the mysterious power of God. When our lives are shaped by divine influence, begotten by the Spirit—formed and claimed by God—whether by a sudden turning in life or a lifetime of nurture, a different and unpredictable power comes into the situation. We see a different power at work. We look at things differently. We enter into God’s point of view. We act from the perspective of God.

With Nicodemus, we have to ask, “How? How can these things happen?” Jesus answers, “You’re supposedly a spiritual leader and you don’t know?” In our day we might hear it, “You’ve been going to church all this time and you don’t get it?” Then he apparently turns to the audience, addressing them in the plural: “I’m telling you that we proclaim what we know, and we testify to what we see, but you people do not receive our testimony.”

The words have a harsh edge, but here we get to what is really important: we proclaim what we know. We testify to what we see. The issue is receiving the testimony.

What we know ... What we see ... Receiving the testimony... so often what doesn’t happen.

What we know and see of being claimed and formed by the divine presence is valid. Being born from above does not require a dramatic conversion on a single date. It may be a longer and subtler change, like the conversion that a leader in a church I served in Illinois described. To get the Confirmation Class started that year, I asked the elders to meet with them one night, to share their own experiences of Confirmation and to talk about their faith and what being part of the church means to them. When I asked him to come, Dieter,² an immigrant from Germany, told me: “Well, I was never confirmed, because it was during the War in Germany, you know.” I told him, “Then just share whatever your experience was. That’s what they need to know.”

None of us was prepared for the rest of the story when Dieter took his turn in the meeting. “I was never confirmed, you see. We had started classes, but it was in the War. One day we came for our class and the church had been bombed, and our pastor was lying there dead in the rubble of the sanctuary.” Dieter went on to describe the succeeding years of confusion and anger at God for everything that happened in the war, moving to the U.S. and putting some kind of life together, the death of his first wife, and his experience of the profound absence of God. Now in this story, we want some flash of recognition, some dramatic moment, some sudden conversion ... one day.

There was no such thing.

Yet maybe his simple story gives us some courage to proclaim what we know and to testify to what we see. Dieter met his second wife, and she persuaded him to come to church with her. He obliged not because he had had any conversion, but simply because he loved her, and he was committed to getting along with her and making her happy. Going to church seemed harmless enough.

Now somehow over the course of years, Dieter started to realize, simply by being with people who gathered each week to seek and to acknowledge the presence of God, to give thanks together in a sanctuary for the mysterious gifts of life ... in the midst of this, he started to realize that God is present—no flashing lights, no big event, on no particular day—just the slow realization, a realization that seemed to be taking place even as he spoke to the Confirmation class about it, “Now, I know that God is here with us.”

“I walked a long dark road far from God,” we might hear him say. “I found my way to God’s people, and God was there.” He knew himself included in a loving presence called God. Dieter

² The name has been changed to protect the privacy of the individual. He is unavailable to request permission.

proclaimed what he knew. He testified to what he had seen. And here is what is essential—the circle receiving the testimony.

Receiving the testimony—of those who know a holy presence in swinging a hammer on a Habitat project, and of those who know that same presence as they lift their voices in song, of those who know God’s power in the support of a caring community in times of illness and loss, and of those who have found God’s presence in times when they have felt most abandoned.

Receiving the testimony of a wide variety of knowledge and experience of the divine presence; receiving the testimony about things that do not necessarily name God’s presence or absence but bring the realities of our lives into the light. The experience of victims of sexual assault; the struggles of people with mental illnesses; the victims of human rights abuses in countries near and far; the evidence of environmental destruction for quick profit; the corruption of the money-changers in the Temple; the doubts and fears that plague us ... you can make this long, long list ... truth-telling at all levels.

Receiving the testimony, about the realities in our lives that rouse us to express our gratitude for the people who loved us and validated our worth, who accepted us a gift born from above; for the people who instilled empathy in us by receiving the testimony of our lives; for the children who grace our lives and the adolescents who keep us humble; and for the precious gift of life itself.

Born from above—proclaiming what we know, testifying to what we see, and receiving the testimony. To be born from above, though, means not only proclaiming what we know and testifying to what we see but also receiving the testimony.

Back to that scene in the airport. “The Spirit blows where it wants to and you hear its voice, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going—so it is with everyone who is begotten from the Spirit.”

“Are you born again?” How does the one who is born from above respond? The question is not really about me, but about the one who is asking. “Receive my testimony,” it says. “Hear my story.” If we are born from above, we are empowered to make the unexpected response, secure in what we know, what we have seen and heard, secure, paradoxically, in the permissibility of doubt, secure enough to receive the testimony.

Perhaps the response is something like this, “What does it mean to you to be born again? Tell me about it.”

Receiving the testimony and allowing a different possibility where the Spirit leads—there is no way to control a better outcome for such a conversation, but we do know that defensiveness and counter-attack begets counter-attack and defensiveness. Flesh begets flesh. What is born of spirit is spirit. Only a different spirit in me can enliven a different spirit in the other.

So how can these things happen? The rest of the scene is a speech from Jesus that unfolds more about the answer to this question from Nicodemus. The speech contains that famous verse that we see on signs in the stands at football games, on key chains and refrigerator magnets, the verse that many evangelical Christians understand as the focal verse in the whole Bible—John

3:16—usually translated, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

It is another verse that we who have a more universalist understanding and perhaps a lower Christology, tend to hear defensively, because, frankly, it is too often used as ammunition. We hear it with the self-righteous tone: “Believe in the one and only son Jesus (and especially the atoning sacrifice of Jesus) or else! —or else you will perish.”

The emphasis in this passage is really not on these aspects. Let’s hear it in context: “If I speak to you about earthly matters and you do not trust me, how will you trust me about heavenly matters?” Then before he goes on to explain he makes a swipe at the other major claims to special knowledge of “heavenly matters,” especially all the other “sons of God,” particularly the emperors who were supposedly taken up into heaven on their death or began to claim the status of Son of God while they were alive. “And no one has gone up into heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of Man.”

Here the credential is not from one of these “sons of God” who ascends, but the Son of humanity who has come down. We need, I believe, to hear this exclusive language as dismissing imperial claims to divinity and as elevating Jesus to proclaim the real divine power. And then we have the explanation of how this works—in a stark contrast to the divine emperors—“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so also the Son of Humanity must be lifted up, in order that all who trust in him may have eternal life.”

Perhaps we can see two standards being lifted behind the actors on our stage, the bronze snake on the pole and an image of crucifixion, two images of terror, two graphic symbols of truth-telling. The snake in the wilderness—find the healing power in looking squarely at what bit you. The crucifixion—find the transforming power in looking squarely into the instrument of terror that the Empire uses to enforce its will.

Trust in the power, not of the one who wields such terror but the one who suffers under it and still tells the truth to power as they did earlier in the Temple. This is the one who knows what it’s like, in whose presence we can tell the truth about our lives, in whose presence we can lift the images of the snakes that have bit us. For Dieter, the image of that German pastor lying dead in the bombed out church. For the young man in airport, whatever state his life was in before the day of his rebirth. For any of us, what we need to face squarely and say aloud in the circle of truth.

Then we can hear John 3:16 not as exclusionary text but a metaphor of hope. The metaphor here is not about an angry God who needs a sufficient sacrifice to pay for our sins, a confusing God who sends his Son to be the sacrifice for us. The metaphor here is a father who sends his precious son to serve a cause that is larger than the immediate family. It evokes the feeling of parents sending their children off to war, a feeling that pulls on our hearts today, yet the cause is the opposite of war, and the focal point turns the military values of the time on their head.

This “Son” is sent not to destroy and condemn and conquer but to evoke the trust of all who suffer and offer life. This “Son” is not like the other so-called “Sons of God,” Emperors who come to conquer by violence and terror. This “Son” is not sent to condemn and judge and exclude but to invite the world into a saving circle of trust. That circle of trust is the image of the light.

Here the circle is made by Jesus, but what is important is the light of truth he represents, not making him or his name a force for exclusion. What is important about our connection to Jesus in this circle is for us to trust that this circle of truth is already there. We come into it this light of truth knowing that we do not create the truth or the circle. We join it.

So, we see Jesus by the fire there on the improvised stage. The fire and Jesus make a circle of light, with the image of the snake and the crucifixion shining in the firelight as a backdrop. This circle of light is a circle of trust; a circle of truth-telling; a circle where we can give voice to what we know; a circle where we can tell about what we have seen; a circle where we can tell the truth about our lives and our testimony will be received; a circle from which we can act authentically on the truths we share; as Jesus and his disciples did in the Temple, speaking truth to power.

Do you see Nicodemus still there in this circle of light or has he slipped away into the night? For the circle of trust and truth-telling is not meant for judgment, but as the text says it can work that way, because there are those who do not seek a circle of trust but a place to hide their dishonest ways. It is hard to come into the light of truth, and all of us have difficulty bringing our webs of deception into the light.

But from this take encouragement, the circle of truth-telling and truth-doing is being made among us, as we are being born from above. “But those who do what is true come into the light, in order that their deeds might be made known because their deeds have been done in God.”

May our living make it so.

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