

John 3:1-17

New Revised Standard Version

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus 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?" Jesus answered, "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 said 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

"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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"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.

"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.

There is a story of a little girl who was asked to write about birth. She went home and asked her mother how she had been born. Her mother didn't want to get into it so she said the stork brought her and left her on the doorstep. Continuing her research she asked her dad how he had been born. Her father said he was found at the bottom of the garden. His daughter asked how he had gotten there and he said the fairies brought him. Then the girl went and asked her grandmother how she had arrived. Her grandma said she was picked from a gooseberry bush. With this information the girl wrote her paper. When the teacher asked her later to read it in front of the class, she stood up and began, "There has not been a natural birth in our family for three generations."<sup>1</sup>

Nicodemus had questions. He had lived his life as a prominent citizen of the town. He knew all the right people, and was on all of the right nonprofit boards. The most prestige came from his participation on the Sanhedrin. It was the ancient Jewish equivalent of the United States Supreme Court. The Sanhedrin was the highest legal and religious authority in Jewish life as they interpreted biblical laws. Important men like Nicodemus were on the Sanhedrin Council. To be appointed you had to know your Torah as well as math and medicine. You had to be fluent in different languages. Everyone in the city knew who you were and respected you.

Nicodemus is curious about Jesus, and it seems like he wants to believe but he struggles. Nicodemus says that he knows Jesus comes from God, but he struggles after Jesus starts talking about being born from above. John's Gospel does this a lot. Jesus will say something, people are confused, and then Jesus talks some more. Nicodemus shows up two more times in John's Gospel. The first time Nicodemus shows up is in this passage that we read today, Nicodemus has questions and is confused. Then, the second time he shows up he reminds his colleagues that according to the law they should not judge Jesus before giving him a trial (John 7:45-52). Then, after Jesus' crucifixion Nicodemus goes with Joseph of Arimathea to bury the body of Jesus (John 19:38-42). He publicly honors the one who was just executed.

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<sup>1</sup>Story from Rev. Richard Fairchild here: <http://spirit-net.ca/sermons/b-trinmsu.php>

Nicodemus shows us faith takes time and it isn't a straight line. When Nicodemus comes to Jesus this first time, I'm sure he had it all planned. First, he would present his case and tell Jesus what he knew. Then, he would ask Jesus some questions about some of the things he had seen Jesus do. Then Nicodemus would ask the real question he carried, maybe it's the same question you carry, the question that expressed how he just felt off lately; how he had this sense there was something more; how it felt like he had a loneliness that never went away no matter how much money he made or how well-respected he was in the community. People saw Nicodemus as successful, but he longed for something substantial to shift in his life.

Jesus' confusing response about being born from above only made Nicodemus have more questions. Jesus' words made no sense, and Nicodemus told him so. When I was in high school, I was a part of a Bible study with four other girls. Our leader had such strong faith. She never doubted and faith came easily to her. She helped me to see the hand of God in the lives of people around me. She showed me that our world is magical and filled with beauty. She would say to me that God was all around me. She helped me to take a breath and to thank God for little things.

I remember a story she told us about her young son seeing an angel. As she told the story about her son talking with an angel, I assumed her son had an imaginary friend. It wasn't real. I am someone who likes black and white, and I have had to learn how to find peace with the gray, with the uncertainty, with unanswered questions. To say that God is mystery doesn't make my heart feel better, it makes my heart race. I crave certainty and control, and God invites me to embrace uncertainty and mystery.

Faith comes for me in fits and starts, two steps forward and another back. Sometimes life and God seems clear and other times everything is just confusing. Faith to me seems more about the questions, rather than easy answers. I celebrate Nicodemus who struggled, who was curious, not satisfied with easy answers, and not afraid to ask more questions.

Nicodemus came to Jesus knowing how God worked. Jesus tries to help Nicodemus see more depth, more grace, more mystery than he imagined was even possible. But this deepening of faith was a mystery to Nicodemus and this mystery was not something Nicodemus could understand for himself. His questions were not given simple answers and he craved simple answers. It didn't matter how much Nicodemus studied or how many degrees he had on the wall. It didn't matter how many languages he learned in Duolingo. You can't earn your way into this new way of becoming. There is no test for this deepening of the soul. It is like the wind that blows across your face from an unknown origin to an unknown destination. The new birth, this new becoming, begins and ends with God's Spirit, not us. God's Spirit blows where she wants, changing the lives of all she touches.

I wish that I could control God. I wish that I could fully understand this mystery. But, I know that God mends my heart. I know God fills my heart and soul with love. We might be like Nicodemus and we're not ready to open ourselves up to God. We think we have too much to protect and too much we want to control. Nicodemus came to Jesus saying, "We know..." and he leaves asking Jesus, "How can these things be?"

God is patient. God kept working on Nicodemus across three years and sixteen chapters in John's Gospel.<sup>2</sup> God keeps pursuing us and never stops. God will keep working in and on and through us. Today in our church calendar we celebrate the Trinity: Father, Son, Holy Spirit or Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. We don't have to understand it to be a part of the church created,

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.davidlose.net/2021/05/trinity-b-the-patron-saint-of-curious-christians/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+DavidLose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29](http://www.davidlose.net/2021/05/trinity-b-the-patron-saint-of-curious-christians/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+DavidLose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29)

redeemed, and sustained by the triune God. Faith doesn't always come easily, and God won't give up on us. Thanks be to God, Amen.