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The ABC's of Faith N - New

John 3:1-17 3Now 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.

Being born is hard work. Now there's an novel insight! I can't help but laugh whenever I remember the Lamaze childbirth instructor whom Barbara and I took classes from prior to our youngest daughter's birth when she said, "*Well yes, sometimes the woman will experience some small degree of discomfort during the birthing process.*" *Some degree of discomfort.* I believe this would be a contender for the understatement of the year award. Bill Cosby's illustration is much more apt when he suggests that if a male wants to imagine what childbirth feels like, he should try to stretch out his upper lip over his head. *Some degree of discomfort.* And I will also

never forget those first few moments of Katie's life, three weeks past her due date and finally having to be evicted, when she looked at me with what appeared to me to be both profound surprise – “Hey, what happened! I was just minding my own business.....” – and what I took to be exhaustion. And there was no question that Barbara was exhausted. Yes, birth is hard, hard work. New life always is, isn't it?

That may be why Nicodemus, in our story for today, says to Jesus *“Huh? How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”* It was hard enough work the **first** time for both mother and child; why would you want to repeat it even if you could? But this whole story is a curious one, isn't it? It almost seems that Nicodemus is **purposefully** misunderstanding Jesus. I mean, can anyone really be that dense? The story tells us that Nicodemus, a well-respected member of the Jewish leadership, comes by night to Jesus and greets Jesus by telling him what an obviously deeply spiritual man Jesus is, how he obviously is from God. But he hardly gets that greeting out of his mouth when Jesus says to him in response, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born in a new way.” Wait a minute. Why did Nicodemus then respond with his counter-question about the impossibility of being “**born in a new way**”? Well, the Greek here is ambiguous and can also just as legitimately be translated as “born again,” or “born from above,” or “born anew” – and Jesus is actually playing here on this ambiguity.

But Nicodemus wasn't ready to deal with ambiguity and with words that have an intentional double meaning. Why not? Well, that detail about Nicodemus coming to Jesus “by night” is not just a throwaway line, some insignificant detail. No, something has been gnawing at Nicodemus. And when do **our** questions most gnaw at **us**? At night. When do those voices that we mostly manage to shut out by day that say “*You should have done this*” or “*You should have done that*” come? At 3 a.m. When does

our guard let down and our most worried fears about our children or grandchildren, our friends or our parents, most successfully clamor for our attention? In those quiet hours of the night. When do the questions that we have about God, about life's meaning, about good and evil, right and wrong, make themselves unavoidable? At night; in the wee hours of the night when all else is stilled.

And that was Nicodemus too. He is a respected member, John tells us, of the Jewish leadership. But he now has begun to be troubled by questions that he doesn't know how to answer in those middle-of-the night moments. In some way he's begun to re-think, to question, the position he's supposed to represent, what he is supposed to be advocating – harsher treatment of those Jewish brothers and sisters who affirmed Jesus as the Christ. Middle of the night wonderings that finally drive him to Jesus with those questions. Something has gotten hold of Nicodemus that leaves him unsettled, so much so that he finally goes to the very one whom he thought he was so opposed to!¹ But life is like that, sometimes, isn't it? When we are young, we tended to think we could know everything with absolute certainty; the older most of get, thought, we realize that all those things that we were so certain about, that we put such energy into, are actually much more gray-colored than we were able or willing to admit. In one of Bob Dylan's most haunting songs, he says this:

*Yes, my guard stood hard when abstract threats;
Too noble to neglect
Deceived me into thinking, I had something to protect
Good and bad, I define these terms, Quite clear, no doubt, somehow.
Ah, but I was so much older then, Im younger than that now.²*

Do you know what he means? Have **you** felt what he is describing when he sings "My

¹I am, of course, aware that, due to space limitations, there is much more to be said concerning John's depiction of Jesus and Nicodemus as it is colored by and retrojected into the story by the animosity between synagogue and church at the turn of the first century.

²Bob Dylan, "My Back Pages," www.lyricsfreak.com/b/bob+dylan/my+back+pages_20021154.html

existence led by confusion boats, mutiny from stern to bow”? I do. And three a.m. is the time when those questions, those wonderings, those worries, tend to come out and run amuck in one’s psyche.

And so something – some doubt about what he was doing, some wondering about whether what Jesus had been saying was actually right, some worry about where his life was going – drove Nicodemus to Jesus at night. But here’s the thing: this “Nick at night” – pardon the pun -- just like you or I at night, at 3 a.m., may be very good at **raising** those soul-nagging questions, but, all by ourselves, we are not so good with answers. We don’t generally do our best thinking when besieged by worries and tired. How many of you have written down something on a bedside notebook at three in the morning, just *knowing* that it was brilliant, only to find that it was so much gibberish by light of day? Such inability to think well may be the reason that Nicodemus is incapable, it seems, of understanding Jesus’ own pun here, his play on words regarding “born again” and “born from above” and “born in a new way.” It’s also why, I think, that Jesus doesn’t engage Nicodemus in a long, drawn-out exchange, but simply cuts to the chase with Nicodemus by talking about the Kingdom of God. Now, Nicodemus hadn’t asked about that, but Jesus was smart enough to see that was indeed exactly what was driving Nicodemus to him on that late night occasion. For what is the Kingdom of God except a wonderful expression, scriptural shorthand, as it were, for a new kind of life that it is possible to live in the arms of a loving God, the kind of peace that one can find knowing that God’s love is, as the old hymn has it, “greater than all our sin”? Jesus knew that Nicodemus had been driven to him by his worries and wonderings about life, about how to live it, about what God is like, about good and evil, about things done and undone, regrets and recriminations. Nicodemus has come to Jesus with the unstated but oh-so-plain question: *“What is the meaning of my life and how can I live a good and fulfilled life? How can I find new life in these ways?”*

It is to all that, then, that Jesus gives his wise play-on-words answer: You must be born **in a new way**, you must be **born again**, you must be born **from above**. And then he goes on with perhaps the most famous and beloved New Testament passage: *“For God so loved the world, that He sent His only son....”* Here is the way I understand all this, you can sum it up this way: Jesus is telling Nicodemus two things – **WHAT** he should know about the nature of new life, of the Kingdom, of God, of a life lived in the assurance of God’s love, and **HOW** he will come to know these things. The **“WHAT,”** then, is this: God loves the world so very, very much, loves you and loves me so very, very much that God would show us by the life, teachings, death and resurrection of God’s own Son that that love un-defeatable. What wonderful news in those three a.m. moments, when life is full of those confusion boats.

And **HOW** do you know this? By the gentle workings of the Spirit of God in your life. Rev. Laura Mendenhall says this, written as if she were talking to Nicodemus: This is not, Nicodemus,

...about what you do. You do not give birth to yourself.... God is the one who breathes life into you and gives you birth from above.... in the midst of our struggling... God is giving us birth, laboring over us, breathing life into us, pushing us out into a life lived in God's presence, an eternal life.

This is not about you or me, it is about those folks that God has put in our lives who continue to help birth in us our best: Rev. Mendenhall continues:

What would happen to us if we listened for God to call forth from us that which we did not recognize as being possible? Throughout my life I have had people call forth from me gifts which I did not recognize [that I had]. I am certain my experience is not unique. Someone names a gift in you as if it existed and as you live into their expectation, you experience the reality of such a gift. God calls into existence things that do not yet exist. God calls forth life which we cannot bring

about on our own. What might God be calling forth from us now?³

My wife, the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, puts all this eloquently when she says:

...[What] God is wanting to give [you is] a new life, an abundant life, a life not entrapped and entangled by past mistakes and old wounds. God is able, even in an old, time-hardened life to do a new thing.... To be born anew, afresh, again means forgiveness of the past... and it means power to live a different kind of life than we have before. This is the meaning of the claim that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, born anew, born from above.⁴

And so what happened with Nicodemus? What happened from his encounter with Jesus when he brought his questions and his worries and his wonderings? Well, God indeed gave him new birth. We only see him two more times (and he is only mentioned in John's gospel). The first of those times, he is arguing with the other Jewish leaders that they need to be fair to Jesus and not condemn him without a fair and full hearing. Something was changing in Nicodemus, something was being newly born in him, that caused him to risk his own standing by standing up for Jesus. And then, the final time we see him, he has gone with Joseph of Arimathea to help bury Jesus' bruised and broken body. Nicodemus has indeed been born again. Born in a new way. **From** one who was part of those who stood against Jesus **to** one who would risk his own life to do the honorable and respectful thing in the face of Jesus' death. "...when all the disciples had fled... Nicodemus came forward.... no longer intimidated or afraid. Nicodemus had come to realize that he was born from above not by his own

³ http://day1.org/677-born_of_the_wind

⁴ Rev. Barbara S. Blaisdell, "The School of Love: A Lamaze Class for Love," preached at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Concord, California, February 17, 2002

doing but by the love of God who birthed him anew and gave him a life of boldness.”⁵

Before we close, I must say this: It is sadly ironic and unfortunate that these two wonderful affirmations – that God is at work to help give folks new births and that God so loved this world that He gave His only son – have been twisted by some into weapons to beat people up and to judge who is not a real Christian. Because this just isn't what the scripture says. Yes, some people can point to a dramatic “born again” moment when life came anew and re-cast like a flash of brilliant light. Others, like Nicodemus, like maybe you and me, find the process of new birth, new life, takes longer and we can point to no specific date and time. But that doesn't mean the new birth that God is constantly working on in your life isn't just as real! And when Jesus says “*Whoever believes in me will have eternal life*” he said just that – he **didn't** say “those who *don't* are damned to hell for all time.” **The two statements are not equivalent.** To believe in Jesus is to know the joy of life abundant and eternal, to know that you don't have to save yourself, to know that unconquerable love is at the heart of the universe. If you don't believe, you may not know these things. And that will make your life less rich, less lovely, more anxious than it needs to be. But God still loves you, God still is trying to be at work in your life, God is still hoping that you will know the joy of a deciding to live as Jesus' disciple. These beautiful words from Jesus' lips are not about **excluding**, they are about **including**, they are about grace. Don't ever let anyone beat you up with them, or take any delight in mistakenly saying that God looks forward to damning those who don't believe.

Nicodemus was indeed born in a new way. The God of unconditional love, who loves this world beyond our imagining, worked in Nicodemus' life to re-make him, to make him indeed into a new creation. How is God doing that in your life?

⁵http://day1.org/677-born_of_the_wind