

## Paying Attention to the Wind

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John 3: 1-17

Well, Nicodemus was a “believer” who was in the dark. That's what John's gospel means when it says that Nicodemus “came to Jesus by night.” We've tried to read this story like a newspaper account and tried to come up with reasons why he came “by night,” saying things like he didn't want to be seen by anyone being a leading Pharisee and all. But, as I keep saying in Bible study, you can't read the Gospel of John as a historical, journalistic account! It is thorough-going theology. You have to read it always with an eye to its symbolism.

Already in the first chapter John has spoken of Jesus as the “Light” in the darkness. And what we miss in today's reading that really is the key to understanding it, are the last couple of verses in chapter two leading right into this story. There we're told that when Jesus “was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the *signs* that he was doing. But Jesus on his part (didn't believe in them) would not entrust himself to them...” And then it goes into the story of Nicodemus and the first thing Nicodemus says to Jesus is what?

“Rabbi, we know 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.” Nicodemus is an example of just those kind of “believers” in Jesus' name because of the signs, because of the miracles, an example of one of the ones to whom Jesus would not entrust himself. He's a “believer” who's in the dark! Being “wowed” by mighty signs and miracles is not what Jesus is after. I mean this is a pretty good confession of faith isn't it? “We know you are from God.” You might expect Jesus to say, “Blessed are you Nicodemus, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you.” But, instead Jesus confronts Nicodemus, saying you don't have the kind of belief I'm looking for. “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus is a believer in Jesus' name who's in the dark!

Well, there's only one conclusion. There are ways to be a “believer” that are not the faith of Jesus Christ. There are ways to be a “believer” that are not an authentic participation in the Kingdom that God is seeking to bring among us. There are ways to be a “believer” that are not an active trusting in the God Jesus reveals. And the inadequate way that the Gospel of John is talking about in this story is a way that emphasizes and is fascinated with miraculous signs and mighty works of God. And there's something in us that loves that, isn't there? Claims are still made aren't they, that this church or that preacher or this evangelist is surely of God because just look at the mighty things God has done through them?

And this story says that those kind of believers need to be born from above, born *again*...even those who try to make “born again” Christians by just such appeals to God's mighty signs...and yes, even those who try to make having a particular type of dramatic religious experience which they call being “born again” into yet another mighty sign, who try to make that religious experience into what being born from above means. They even yet, like we all, need to be born from above. Being born from above is not about a sensation that we have. That's not to say God can't use, and doesn't use for some people, a dramatic sensation to get their attention. It perhaps can be so dramatic that it feels to the person like a whole new start.

But, it's not new to God. It's the same thing God's spirit is always doing, and has always been doing in them, blowing where and how it chooses to give birth to a redeemed creation. See, that's the way Jesus keeps talking about this birth from above, isn't it? It's something that enables us to see and to participate in the kingdom of God. And as we know, that means redeemed relationships of mercy and justice and grace and peace, a redeemed creation right here, not “pie in the sky, by and by.” We know that because we've been taught to pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on *earth*...!

Clarence Jordan has pointed out that there's a big difference between being an admirer of Jesus, and being a disciple of Jesus. And it has to do with that very thing, doesn't it, what we may need to do in our life and in our relationships to actually participate in the Kingdom God is bringing. So, what does it mean to follow Jesus, not just to praise and admire him? And how are we to do that if you really look at some of the things Jesus said, like loving enemies, or being willing to lose everything for him, to be crucified with him?

Says Jesus here in this story and lots of other places, that's the goal, actually participating in the kingdom God is bringing. And so, that's what being born from above is to accomplish. Well, we know don't we, like this story says, there are lots of ways to "believe" that fall far short of that. They are not the faith of Jesus Christ. But friends listen. This is incredibly good news! Says this story, creating that kind of faith in us is the work of God! Nicodemus says, "how can this be?" And Jesus says, it happens because it's who God is. "The wind blows...the spirit blows...it happens! Says Jesus to Nicodemus, "I can't believe you know and teach the story of Israel and you don't understand that that's what God is about this earth doing?"

That's what all the miracles, all the signs (which is why John's gospel chooses that word "signs.") ...what all the signs point to. They don't point to themselves, saying look what mighty deeds God can accomplish, what a mighty God we have! They point to the transformation, the redemption of the world God is trying to accomplish! Says Jesus to Nicodemus, how can you know the history of Israel and not know that? And says John's Gospel, it's the same way with Jesus. The signs don't point to Jesus as one to be praised and admired. They point to one who when lifted up on the cross, who when crucified, reveals fully who God is, and how God appears in the world. And so, they point to Jesus' unwavering trust in the sufficiency of God's love as the kind of faith God would effect in us. They point to Jesus' way of love as the life that flows from that trust. They point to him as one to be followed, even to a cross. Says Jesus, God is making that possible, giving birth to that in us, because God loves the world and would heal it and redeem it.

Friends, whether or not you have ever had some dramatic religious experience, that's what God is doing in you. God is giving you birth from above. It takes a lifetime. It's God's work in us over our lifetime. Here and there and now and then as we live and age, God is enabling our dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity, dying into an old way of being and living into a new one. It happens every day. If we watch we'll see it. Sometimes maybe you're feeling burdened by something, or stressed out and something will happen that will remind you of the reality of God, maybe it's a beautiful sunrise or view of the mountains, or maybe it's seeing someone perform some selfless, random act of kindness. But, you're reminded of the reality of God and suddenly your life seems lighter, there is, as Marcus Borg has said, "a rising out of (your) self-preoccupation and burdensome confinement."

We can't make it happen, the wind blows where it will. But, we can learn to pay attention to what God is doing in us and in the world. Finally, that's what the spiritual disciplines are about: prayer, fasting, worship, study; they're about being reminded of the reality of God and learning to pay attention to it. Maybe you have some other spiritual disciplines that work the same way for you: hiking in the mountains, or walking on the beach, reading, or listening to music, working at a craft of some kind. It's about being reminded of who and where we are and who God is and what God is doing in us, because it's about spending time in that relationship with God, trusting in it, attending to it, reflecting on it.

So, here it is Lent, that traditional time of taking on some spiritual discipline.

So, I would encourage you to take up regular praying, take up a new discipline of bible study, come back to regular worship, take a hike in the mountains, listen to music. Because first of all what it means to follow Jesus according to this story is to pay attention to how the wind's

blowing, to pay attention to what God is doing in you. If we do that, we'll find that every day we're being given new birth from above, and we'll see how God's kingdom is seeking to break through among us, and how we, in the hours and days of our lives, can participate.

Amen.