**Born Again?**

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I have to admit, sometimes I have a bit of an inferiority complex around my friends who are born-again evangelical Christians.

I have friends who can tell you the exact hour of the exact day when they were born again. A day when they became something, or someone, brand new.

They can tell you the precise instant when Christ became such a full and important part of their lives that the old person they were passed away. And someone new was born in its place.

I love these folks. And I really believe what they tell me. That one day it all changed.

The problem I have is that it never happened to me.

My entrance into Christian life was not like that.

I could tell you about key relationships. Like my Freshman roommate in college, a man so devoted to his Christian faith and its call to live simply that he went barefoot everywhere on campus, and had a complicated system of compost buckets that took up a whole corner of our small dorm room.

I remember important communities, like the church where I was raised. The community that saw a pastor in a young boy and had the courage to tell me about it. The place where I saw grownups struggle openly with how best to live out their faith, striving for justice, a world that was being broken by war.

I can even point to a couple important, even somewhat mystical moments, like one afternoon in the National Gallery of Art standing in front of an enormous painting my Mark Rothko that seemed poised to swallow me whole, to the point that it brought me close to tears. Until I glimpsed the faint luminescence that lies behind all of his artwork, a glow that in that instance for me seemed like the very presence of God.

But in the whole constellation of moments in which my spirit has been shifted, or my heart warmed. I really cannot point to any one of them alone as the moment when it all changed, a moment when God’s love became uniquely compelling in my heart, a moment when I was born again.

If you have a moment like that, consider me envious. Really.

But for those of us who don’t, I love the story of Nicodemus. The man who came to Jesus in the still of the night, with questions about God.

Nicodemus was an upright man, no doubt. He was a part of the religious elite. The first century version of a theological scholar in an ivory tower. Outwardly, his life was all polished up. He had cultivated a good image. He was respected by his peers.

And yet, as he heard the rumors about a man named Jesus. A peasant leading a revival with mostly a crowd of the poor, the impure, and the sinful. Something in his heart was drawn to a place he never expected.

Now, a man like Nicodemus could never just walk up to Jesus in the light of the day. It would ruin his reputation.

So he snuck away in the night to see this strange teacher and ask him the questions he was too ashamed to admit he had.

Are there questions that you feel like you have to hide int he cover of night?

 The questions you are embarrassed to ask during the day?

 Something that you feel like you should know since you have been coming to church all these years?

 Or something that it seems like everyone else already knew when you first showed up?

Are there questions that you fear because they open up too much uncertainty?

 Why would God do this to me?

 How can these things happen?

 What if I have been wrong about this all along?

These are the sort of questions we are tempted to tuck away in nighttime places. To leave behind when we head out into the day, lest anyone see us for who we really are. Lest anyone know that we do not have it all together…

That is what Nicodemus was up to when he snuck off at night to see Jesus. He lived with a sense that somehow the life he was living was not enough, that what he had been taught was not quite right, or that there was something more awaiting him in this Jesus…

But he couldn't be sure… So, to hedge his bets, Nicodemus snuck off in the dark of night to see Jesus, to test the waters a little bit without leaving the safe shores of his community’s unquestioned beliefs.

And like most people who ever spoke to, or followed Jesus, he probably left a bit more confused than when he arrived.

But on thing Jesus really seems to insist on is that in order to become a part of God’s realm, you have to be γεννáω ανώθω. A little Greek phrase packed with meaning. A very and a preposition.

The verb is simple. γεννáω. To be born.

The preposition is where it gets tricky. It can mean again. As in born again. It could also mean, from above. Born from above.

Different versions of the Bible translate this differently. Born again. Born from above.

Some say you have to choose. But I think Jesus was being intentionally vague, because he was describing something so mysterious that the only way to grasp it is to wrestle with confusion and uncertainty.

But just incase we missed that, he goes ahead and complicates things further. Jesus throws in “born of water” and “born of the Spirit.”

So what is he describing? What is this birth that we need to seek or achieve.

I think what Jesus is getting at is that when we become his followers something really changes about us. We become something, or someone new. In a very real way we take on a new way of being in the world, almost like we have been born for a second time.

Jesus is saying that in order to become a part of the kingdom of God, that is the world that God is striving to create among us, in order to take our place in that world that is ordered by God’s love and justice.

Somethings about us have to die.

And some new things must be born in their place.

We have to let greed and self-centeredness die. And a wider vision be born in its place.

We have to let die the notion that our own security matters more than the well being of others, and let compassion be born in its place.

We have to let our addiction to thoughtless consumption die, and a more sustainable patter of life be born in its place.

We have to let our fascination with the rich and powerful die, so that we can hear the voices of the poor and oppressed.

Those old things must pass away, so that something new can be born in its place.

We must be born anew, born again, born from above, born of God.

But don’t think that it is going to happen all at once, or once-and-for-all. Not for must of us.

No for must of us, we are going to come along by Nicodemus. Asking embarrassing questions by night, wrestling and struggling with a truth that we cannot quite understand nor fully accept.

Most of us will stumble and full so much along the way that we will reach God’s kingdom with bumps and bruises to show for it.

Try as we might we will falter and fail. We will make a thousand little mistakes and a few big ones.

That’s one of the reasons we are here in fact. That’s really what the church is. It is a support group for disciples like me and like you who are stumbling through life trying to make a new way take hold in our lives.

And my hope is that this can be a place where we can bring those questions, those doubts, that struggle, right into the light of day.

I think that a lot of us grew up with a sense that church was a club for all the people who had it figured out.

I think we believed that church was not a place for questions. That this was instead a place to come once we were certain of what we thought. A destination point for people who had already had answers to life’s more difficult questions.

But I think this is exactly the place we ought to come with our questions, with our doubts, so that we can grow together, slowly, but surely, transform our lives together.

Its the place where we can be born again. Not once and for all. Not in an instant.

But overtime. And together.