

Born to Question; Born to Care
Nicodemus

John 3:1-9; 19:38-42; 3:1-9

(Nicodemus questions Jesus about being born again, challenges those who would kill Jesus, then cares for Jesus' body.)

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[Have Cyclamen and Christmas Cactus in front. Children's Sermon comments upon how differently they bloom and reflects upon faith.]

I like Nic. I've liked Nicodemus ever since the congregation our family attended in Ohio put on a children's musical about him entitled, "Nic at Night." All the kids in the musical wore black t-shirts that glowed in the dark. If people know anything about Nicodemus, they usually bring to mind his nighttime visit to Jesus—to ask the Rabbi a serious question.

Today, our team of great liturgists presented the only three scenes in our Bible in which Nicodemus appears.

Commentators say that darkness is a symbol of separation from God, that Nic was somewhat cowardly for going under cover of night to ask Jesus his question. They assume that Nic goes at night so that his Pharisee colleagues wouldn't know Nic had some interest in what Jesus was preaching. You see, Nicodemus was a Jewish leader.

I am not one always to agree with experts. I really admire Nic for having the courage and passion to ask Jesus his question regarding faith, *no matter what time of day it was*. I think it takes courage to ask any question, whether in a school classroom, at a committee meeting, or in the dark. Think about it—Nicodemus went out at night to "the other side" to inquire about his spiritual wonderment—how courageous is that? Many people just lie on their beds thinking things over until they fall asleep. They never risk pursuing their questions in any determined way.

When Nic reaches Jesus, Nicodemus calls Jesus Rabbi, and then acknowledges that Jesus is a teacher who comes from God.

Here is Nic's question to Jesus: You've been talking about being born again. That defies logic. How can that be? We can't crawl back up the birth canal to our Mother's womb and then be delivered again, can we?

This interchange calls to mind the time when our daughter was about three and our son, about one. Physical differences were obvious, and at the time, we knew some women who were pregnant. Our daughter asked me, "How do babies get out?" I answered, to our daughter's dismay, for my answer seemed quite impossible to her. Then she asked a follow up question. She said, "How do babies get in?" My answer to that question was so long and involved that she did not ask any more questions for a while.

How did *Jesus* respond to Nicodemus' question? Jesus gave a somewhat ambiguous answer. Not only did he use a metaphor, but a metaphor drawn from a word that has two meanings. Jesus said that, as best we can translate into English, we need to be born "from above/again-anew." The word he used could mean "from above" or "again, anew." We need to be born from above. We need to be born again, anew. It's interesting to think about how those are different. To be born "again" implies being born *another time*, whereas to be born "from above" implies being born in a *different way*.

Nicodemus needed to stretch his imagination to understand Jesus. Nic was thinking logically, not metaphorically. Clearly, Nicodemus didn't understand Jesus' metaphor about second births. Jesus realized this. This happens to all preachers and teachers. Start out with one explanation, one image, and you see parishioners' eyes glaze over. You realize it's not making any sense. You think quickly. Go to a different image. Jesus was good at that. He said, well, "It is like the wind, pneuma. The wind blows where it will, and humans can detect it, but we cannot chart it."

Some say that an emphasis upon a second birth implies the first one is not good enough.¹ Yet Jesus does not seem to denigrate the first, physical birth, the birth of our bodily existence. Jesus simply says there is another dimension to life. Like the wind, it is invisible, but it gives us a life from above, life anew, like being born again. Scene I ends.

Scene II.

Visualize this. At the temple, there is a crowd over here. A group of Jewish leaders, the Pharisees, are over here. The police, who had been sent by the Jewish leaders to arrest Jesus, return without Jesus. Not only have they *not* arrested him, but also they come back *witnessing* about Jesus.

I like Nic. He asks good questions. Here he asks, "Doesn't *our* law require that people have a hearing before they are judged?" This is pretty gutsy of Nic, asking this question of his fellow Pharisees. Asking this legal question of the lawyers takes a lot of chutzpa. It would be like an Assistant Attorney General asking the Attorney General and other lawyers whether they should consider a certain aspect of the law before they act.

Nicodemus' question makes it seem he is defending Jesus, maybe even on his side, so Nicodemus is derided, "You're not also from Galilee, are you?" End, Scene II.

Scene III.

Jesus has now been killed, crucified. Nicodemus appears again—and, wouldn't you know, he asks yet another question. He asks a question every time we see him! Nic and his friend, Joseph of Arimathea, ask Pilate for permission to bury Jesus. Pilate allows them to take the body, so they prepare it with oil and herbs and wrap it in linen cloths.

I like Nic. He's quite something in this scene. He brings what would be for us 75 lbs. of myrrh and aloes! Can you imagine leaving Bath and Body Works with 75 pounds of supplies? He's going to *really* prepare Jesus' body! Notice his actions are similar to the Mary who anointed Jesus with so much oil that others chastised her. Not Jesus. Jesus interpreted her extravagant gesture as a symbolic act of anointing him—the Christ. Likewise, we could think that Nicodemus, with all these oils and herbs, as anointing Jesus—as witnessing to Jesus as the Christ.

You and I are accustomed to one grave per person. People today might purchase burial plots *next* to each other, but we do not share plots or recycle them. In ancient days, tombs were not private. I was amazed, when I went on a tour of the catacombs in Rome, to see that tombs were for *families*. People walked into tombs, underground. The Smiths are buried in this room; the Joneses over there. Tombs were not static places; readjustments were made according to the need.

This time, there was a fresh tomb, and Nic and Joseph of Arimathea, with great reverence, placed Jesus into that tomb.

End scene III.

Nic has asked three questions. He asked this question of the spiritual man: "How can one be born again?" He asked this legal question of the religious legalists: "Don't we

need to follow the law?” And, of the man who had great power, he humbly asked: “May we care for Jesus’ body?”

I like Nic. He seems to have been born to question. His questions show courage, searching for faith, concern for justice, and finally, tender caring as he wrapped the body of Jesus.

Nic gets a bad rap, named as the potential disciple who went at night to Jesus.

Let’s get this straight—he went! He asked his question!

Nic was not the last person to ponder about Jesus’ comments about being born again, or being born of spirit, or being born from above, anew. I bet most of us have given some thought to this question at some time in our lives. Either you experienced “being born again” at some moment in time, or someone has asked you, “Are you born again?”

One hundred years ago, at the turn of the last century, William James gave lectures that finally became published in a classic textbook entitled, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.² He asked questions and made keen observations. I think James would have liked Nic.

James noticed that people who are religious fall into two categories—those whom he described as “once born” and those who are more likely to describe themselves as “born again.” I recall studying William James in seminary. His comments made sense to me.

There are some Christians, James noticed, who seem to “develop straight and natural.”³ St. Francis of Assisi, on the whole, and Walt Whitman represent this kind of religious person.⁴ You could say that these once-born people are like Cyclamen, that bloom over and over and over. (Since this Cyclamen was given to me, it has not stopped blooming. It is prolific. I cannot tell you when new blooms appear—they just keep arriving.) These “once born” people can’t date their moments of spiritual growth; they live them daily, sometimes without much agonizing or even questioning. These people whose spiritual growth is gradual often tend to be especially close to nature.⁵

Philosopher William James noticed that, at least when he wrote—a century ago, Protestants tended to emphasize the other alternative, a second-born faith. One reason was that Protestants tended to give more emphasis to humans’ sinful nature. If we are sinful, especially inevitably sinful, then we need to get rid of that sin in order to proceed with a spiritual, healthy life that is good. This can occur through a “born again” experience.⁶

Paul in the Bible is a great example of a “second born” style of Christian. He was trying to persecute Christians. While riding on horseback on the road to Damascus, he had such a powerful experience of the Holy that many of us know about it—he was bolted over by Christ’s presence. We could say he was “born again,” “born from above,” or “born anew.”

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is another who could be described as “born again.” Our church is named “Aldersgate” after the Street where Wesley went to church with doubts and struggles of faith and left with a heart that “was strangely warmed.” He found peace.

Paul, John Wesley, and some of us are like the Christmas cactus. (I can actually remember when my Christmas cactus bloomed. It was early December in 2003, Christmas Eve in 2004, and mid-November last winter. That’s pretty significant

blooming, if you can remember when a *plant* blooms!) “Born again” Christians can often name the time or times when they bloomed in the spirit. Those were such dramatic and powerful experiences that it seemed like a new birth. The Spirit, the wind-of-the-Spirit, blew especially hard, and they were transformed.

I think Wesley would like Nic. I will tell you why. Like Nic, Wesley personally cared a great deal about beliefs and doctrines. He wrote about them, taught them, and encouraged education in churches. Yet, Wesley would also like what Nic did in Scene III, when Nicodemus extended himself generously to care. Wesley said, “I ask not . . . ‘Are you of my church, of my congregation? . . . Do you receive the supper of the Lord in the same . . . manner that I do?’ . . . my only question is this, ‘Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?’ . . .”⁷ “If it be, give me thine hand.”⁸

Some people give testimonies about how their lives were turned around; they changed their ways when they met the Lord. Their witnessing helps to transform others to be born from above.

Yet some people seldom witness in that way. They cannot point to exact times of major spiritual changes. Yet they love life and experience God, the sacred, Christ, in their lives regularly.

Which is better?

One is like the Christmas Cactus. The other is like the Cyclamen, blooming all along.

Which is better?

I like Nic.

May you and I be like Nic. May we ask courageous questions—any time, day or night; anywhere—in church, at home, at school, in court, in political arena; may we ask permission to give crazy-big compassion to people who need our care!

In the kids’ musical, the children wore black t-shirts that glowed in the dark because the title of the musical was “Nic at Night.” I have a better idea for t-shirts that honor Nicodemus, the Nic who was in all three scenes. I saw a t-shirt this past week on a kid who attends our children’s center. It started, “Born to . . .” I couldn’t read the rest, because of the crease in his shirt, but given my sermon title, I was curious. So I asked him what it said. It read, “Born to skate.” Oh well. I propose that shirts, which honor Nic, would read “Born to Question; Born Again to Care.”

¹ There were a number of articles by feminist theologians who wondered whether emphasis upon second births were due in part to the fact that first births are from women. It is as if we need to be born a second time, of a male savior, or be saved.

² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, NY: Macmillan Co., 1961.

³ “happiness is congenital and irreclaimable . . . when unhappiness is offered or proposed to them, [they] positively refuse to feel it, as if it were something mean and wrong.” William James

⁴ “They owe their influence to a certain authoritativeness in the freeing that Nature, if you will only trust her sufficiently, is absolutely good.” p. 78 James

⁵ William James names Walt Whitman as this kind of religious person. “His favorite occupation . . . seemed to be strolling or sauntering about outdoors by himself, looking at the grass, the trees, the flowers.” 82

⁶ “There are people for whom evil means only a mal-adjustment with things, a wrong correspondence of one’s life with the environment. Such evil as this is curable, in principle at least . . . there are others for whom evil is no mere relation of the subject to particular outer things, but something more radical and general, a wrongness or vice in his essential nature, . . . which requires a supernatural remedy . . . on the whole Latin races leaned more towards . . . looking upon evil . . . as made up of ills and sins in the plural, removable in detail; while the Germanic races have tended rather to think of Sin in the singular, and with a capital S, as of something ineradicably ingrained in our . . .” 119 James

⁷ Outler, Albert C. (Ed.) *John Wesley*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 20

⁸ Outler, p. 13