

Experiencing Jesus: New Birth
John 3:1-17
February 10, 2008

We have been watching the emergence of new life in our home in the past three weeks. For our birthdays this year Jeff and I got a new dog. She is a rescue dog whom we have named Cinnamon. The agency says she is 3 years old, but they know nothing of her background. She was very timid, afraid of people, and did not seem well acquainted with the world. When we brought her home, the first thing she did was rub her ear on the carpet and sofa. We heard no bark, but we did hear her cough. Four days into this new adventure we paid a visit to the vet and came home with ear wash, ear drops, flea prevention, toothpaste, and more! She was very mellow, just wanting to lie around, although she would take walks and nibble at her food throughout the day. This past week as the ear infection has healed and the cough subsided, we've experienced a very different dog. She knows her new name and responds. She barks. She eats food voraciously and seems to be asking for more. She plays with toys that previously she would not even touch. She knows the walking routine and patiently awaits the harness and leash. When close to home and let off the leash, she sprints home, knowing exactly where she belongs. I find myself wishing she could talk and tell us exactly what has caused this transformation, but I think I already know. She has experienced love and affection again. A sense of trust in her new owners is growing, allowing her to enjoy life and to express her unique personality. She has found a new life and is being born anew.

Nicodemus is a man in search of new life. John identifies him as a Pharisee, a religious leader of the Jews. He comes to Jesus at night. In John's Gospel night is a metaphor for separation from God. The rabbis had taught that the Torah was best studied at night when it was quiet and the distractions of the day had subsided. Nicodemus uses his precious study time to expand his search beyond the standard texts. Jesus himself becomes the book into which Nicodemus delves, mining every word for wisdom and understanding.¹

Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus as "a teacher who has come from God." Thus far in John's Gospel Jesus has changed water into wine at a wedding in Cana and he has cleansed the Temple of the moneychangers. These powerful signs have indicated to Nicodemus that Jesus must be deeply grounded in the presence of God. Nicodemus is eager to learn and ready to grow.

Without directly stating it but merely by his act of seeking out Jesus, Nicodemus desires to move into the light of God's presence. Jesus recognizes Nicodemus as a sincere religious seeker. He understands that Nicodemus is taking a risk in leaving behind the truth as he has known it in order to explore something new. Jesus invites him into a fresh realm of insight, which will push him far beyond his comfort zone. Realizing his vulnerability in starting down a novel path, Jesus does not embarrass nor condemn Nicodemus. He accepts him where he is on his journey and offers him the possibility of new life.

Jesus immediately takes Nicodemus into a realm of wisdom that is more complex, deep and rich than he has known before. Using language that is poetic, metaphorical, suggestive, and imaginative, Jesus speaks of being born from above. The same words work on three levels: being born a second time, remade completely, and born from on high.

Like most of us, Nicodemus is limited by the familiar "word world," the world he knows best. He responds in his best left-brain, legal-scholar, word-parsing mode. He sees the practical impossibility of Jesus' proposal. Yet Jesus persists from his right-brain, heart vocabulary, with

fertile images of wind, spirit, and expansive love.ⁱⁱ Jesus recognizes Nicodemus' need for a heart experience. He longs for Nicodemus to be caught up on the wings of the Spirit and be flown to the heights of new life with God. He yearns for Nicodemus to be immersed in the warm baptismal waters, drowning to his old way of life, and rising up into the light of God's shining love, which leads him into a new way of life. This is the heart of Jesus' ministry, his passion. He is called to usher in new life where the old has become stagnant, burdensome, sometimes even oppressive. Jesus brings people out of the night so that they may be bathed in the light of God's love.

Nicodemus fades into the background before we know how he responds to Jesus' invitation. In chapter seven he surfaces briefly as his colleagues are discussing how to deal with Jesus. Perhaps in defense of Jesus, he reminds them that no one can be judged without first having a hearing. But Nicodemus' action at the end of Jesus' life, upon his burial, shows that he has taken Jesus' message to heart and his life has indeed been changed by this man. Along with Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus brings about a hundred pounds of spices to anoint Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus recognizes Jesus as God's Anointed One, who brings a new rule and new life to God's people.

Nicodemus comes to trust Jesus' word and follow in his way. He pursues the path that began in the darkness of the womb, continues in the rebirth of the dark night of the soul, and ends, on earth, in the darkness of the tomb. He plunges into the baptismal waters and rises to new life.

Being born from above or born anew is not necessarily a once-in-a-lifetime experience. In my life I find it happening again and again and again. Because I was raised in a Christian family, following Jesus was bred in me. I don't have a dramatic conversion story to tell, but I do have several stories of life-changing experiences or life lessons which have brought new insights and grown me deeper. Being born anew is a continual process if we are alive in Christ Jesus. For just like breathing, if we stop, we die. If we close our hearts and minds to the presence of God, we become lifeless and stagnant. We need opportunities to be revitalized in order to continue growing spiritually.

Sometimes as for Nicodemus, it takes an encounter in the night to awaken us to new birth. Listen to a poem written by David Whyte called, "Sweet Darkness."

When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also

When your vision has gone
no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark
where the night has eyes
to recognize its own.

There you can be sure
you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your womb
tonight.

The night will give you a horizon
further than you can see.

You must learn one thing.
the world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of your aloneness
to learn

anything or anyone
that does not bring you alive
is too small for you.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Anything or anyone that does not bring you alive is too small for you.” What might be “too small for you?” What feeling, environment, relationship, or attitude do we need to grow out of into fresh perspective? Carl Jung wrote, “People live as though they were walking in shoes too small for them.” “He explains that men and women in general live lives without meaning. He found that living without meaning prevents one from a life of intensity and fullness and, in this way, people live in ‘shoes too small.’”^{iv}

Jesus tells Nicodemus and us, “You need not live in shoes that are too small for you. You need not live lives void of meaning.” Explore that which hinders you, whatever diminishes your vitality, something you’ve outgrown. What is it costing you to walk in shoes too small for you? How does it affect your family? your friends? your co-workers? In what ways is God calling you to grow, to be born anew? It may be risky to venture forth into the unknown. We may need to confront deep fear within. But unless we die to the old, to what is too small, to what we’ve outgrown, we cannot be born anew into the fullness of life God has for us.

But we must beware that we cannot control the breath of the Spirit. We can only be open to receive the fresh winds God breathes to revive and make new. Even in the dark we are not beyond the love of God.

In this season of Lent, the springtime of the Spirit, may the fresh winds of God’s Holy Spirit blow through you, reviving your soul and bearing you into new life.

ⁱ Patricia Farris, “Late-night seminar,” *Christian Century*, January 30-February 6, 2002, p. 19.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Whyte, “Sweet Darkness” from *House of Belonging*, 2004. Quoted in *The Bible Workbench* 15:2.

^{iv} Francine Bray, *The Bible Workbench* 15:2.