

Born from Above – John 3:1-17 – March 12, 2017

Alyce McKenzie, a professor at Perkins School of Theology, shares this story: "I was in the waiting area at our local Discount Tire store last week waiting for my new tires to be put on my car. I picked up a women's magazine and was intently reading an article called, 'How to supercharge your metabolism.' I became vaguely aware that someone had sat down in the chair next to mine. This seemed odd because I was in the middle of a row of empty chairs. I like my personal space while I'm waiting for my tires. Then a leaflet was put in front of my face with the heading: 'How to be born again' and I heard a man's voice ask, 'Wouldn't you like to read something of more eternal significance than this magazine? Have you been born again?'

"I looked up into the face of an earnest man in his mid 40s who now sat next to me, looking at me expectantly. When I didn't reply immediately, he asked, 'Well, have you?' I said, 'I'm glad you asked that question. I've been reflecting on Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John chapter 3 and I don't think Jesus means 'born again' as if it were some emotional lightning strike that once it's over, we speak of our salvation in the past tense, like, that's done, now I have that checked off my to-do list. I think being born again calls for our participation, and I think it's a lifelong process.' At that the man shook his head as if to say 'Geez, lady, it's a yes or no question. How hard is that?' He took his tract back and moved on."

<http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Nicodemuss-Non-Decision-Alyce-McKenzie-03-14-2011>

It was nighttime when Nicodemus came to see Jesus. It was the time of the Jewish Passover and Jesus was in Jerusalem with his disciples. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council. He was a scholar and a leader, a righteous man and strict follower of the Jewish Law, but he was intrigued by Jesus. He was curious enough about Jesus to come talk to him, but only under the cover of night, so as not to be seen. He had been witness to the signs that Jesus performed, and he believed that only someone who came from God could perform them.

Nicodemus, as one of the religious leaders, was looking for answers. Perhaps he wanted to engage Jesus in a theological debate about the law, to see where he stood on certain issues. Clearly, Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher, but he was an unknown. Jesus could perform deeds of power and spoke knowledgably about God, but he criticized the religious leaders and their practices. Nicodemus rightly wondered, who is this fellow? But if Nicodemus was looking for simple, straight-forward answers, he was in the wrong place.

In the exchange that followed, Jesus talked about being born again, or also translated, being born from above. In order to see the kingdom of God, one must be born anew. Well, poor

Nicodemus got stuck in his literalism. So Jesus rephrased it. One must be born of the Spirit. But Nicodemus still couldn't comprehend what Jesus was talking about. He was an educated man looking for logical answers, but Jesus was talking on a different level. "How can this be?" Nicodemus wanted to know.

Jesus saw in Nicodemus a person who was standing on the edge of God's kingdom and looking in. Nicodemus was righteous and pious, and apparently, he was someone curious to know more. He knew all the right answers, the right "churchy" answers, but he didn't know how to apply his faith to his life; he didn't know how to live them. So Jesus was trying to push him further in his faith. To make his faith more than just something he knew in his head, but to allow the Spirit of God to work within and through him, so his faith was realized as an active part of his life.

Jesus said that one must be born of the Spirit, and he described the Spirit of God as a wind that blows when and where it chooses; it is unpredictable where this wind might blow. The Spirit cannot be tied down or controlled. God's Spirit moves at will.

And for Nicodemus, this was a frightening scenario - opening himself up to the unpredictability and irrationality of God's Spirit. It is so much safer and easier to simply follow the Law. Nicodemus had studied it all his life; he was comfortable with it and he was comfortable with where he is in life. The law was black and white, the rituals and festivals were consistent. There were no surprises, no challenges.

Yet Nicodemus was curious enough to visit Jesus, late one evening. He recognized that God was working through Jesus, and he saw a spark of something other, something that he lacked - a hollowness that could not be filled with law or ritual. Something he longed to know and experience. Something that pushed him to go and talk to Jesus. But when Jesus began to talk in metaphor about the mystery that is God and push Nicodemus into releasing control of his life to the whim of God's Spirit, allowing for life altering changes to occur...born from above? Born anew? Nope. Not today.

We are not unlike Nicodemus. We have our logical understandings of God, and we have our routines of worship and participation. We put in our allotted time for God and we contribute our resources and gifts to the church. And we have become comfortable. And there are questions about God and Jesus and the bible that we have, and we have grown accustomed to the ambiguity. If we don't ask them, we don't have to wrestle with the mystery. We water down the gospel to a reasonably acceptable point. As long as it doesn't infringe on our

accepted level of comfort, we are happy to participate. As long as it makes sense and does not defy logical reasoning, we're good.

But in the dark of night, when the questions come and the longing for something more keeps us turning in our sheets, will we get up out of bed and go looking for Jesus? Will we open ourselves to the mystery of Jesus, will we accept him not only as our moral teacher but as the one who reveals to us the very nature of God, and is in fact Incarnation? Will we allow ourselves to be open to the unpredictable movement of God's Spirit, being reborn and transformed by that very Spirit as we participate in the unveiling of God's kingdom in our world? Or will we stand on the edge of the kingdom, looking inward, but too afraid to suspend what we know and believe, too afraid to open ourselves to the mystery that is God and be shaped by God's transforming Spirit?